

***Poshlost'* in Nabokov's *Dar* through the Prism of Lotman's Literary Semiotics**

by

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## Note on Transliteration

This thesis uses the Library of Congress system of transliteration from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet. However, Nabokov's own transliteration conventions are retained when quoting his works.

## Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Stephen Aylward

August 2011

## Abstract

The word *poshlost'* denotes the concepts of banality, vulgarity or phlistinism, and has been an intellectual and cultural obsession since the second half of the nineteenth century, lasting well into the twentieth century. Russian author Vladimir Nabokov attempted to familiarize English-speaking readers with the notion of *poshlost'* in his book *Nikolai Gogol* (1944); it is hard to find any English-language exposition of the term that does not cite Nabokov's vigorous elaboration of it. Moreover, it is arguably a convention in scholarship to acknowledge the relationship between *poshlost'* and Nabokov's uncompromising moral and aesthetic values. *Poshlost'* has often been discussed as a theme in Nabokov's fiction, and its bearing on Nabokov's role as a cultural critic has often been assessed, but there are few studies that examine how the concept influences the overall composition and interpretation of his fiction.

This thesis examines how *poshlost'* functions as a literary device in Nabokov's final Russian-language novel *Dar* (1938), which tells the story of an émigré Russian writer living in Berlin in the 1920s. I look at *poshlost'* from the perspective of the theories of aesthetic innovation advanced by semiotician and cultural theorist Iurii Lotman, and within this framework I link *poshlost'* with the formation and re-formation of the protagonist's, as well as the author's, consciousness. I consider it a relational construct rather than simply an immanent feature of the text, as it would be considered in Russian Formalist approaches. Among the topics I focus on are individuation, self-modelling and autocommunication as facets of the process of personal and creative maturation. I argue that *poshlost'* serves as a means of modelling Nabokov's aesthetics as a textual feature and is a multisignifying and a multifaceted device whose overall artistic effect depends on the conditions under which it is employed.

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## Dedication

To my parents, John and Pauline Aylward,  
and to Dorm and Josephine Greening.

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## Introduction

### 0.1 Objective

In this thesis I examine the Russian concept of *poshlost'* as it is employed as a literary device in Vladimir Nabokov's final Russian-language novel *Dar* (1938). The protagonist of the novel is an author, Fyodor, who is preoccupied with avoiding *poshlost'* in his writing. Yet in choosing such a well-worn theme as the creative struggles of a writer, Nabokov himself risks falling into the banality his protagonist condemns. I will examine the text according to the structuralist and cultural semiotic theories of Iurii Lotman with the aim of elucidating how he avoids this danger and tells the story of Fyodor's preoccupation with *poshlost'* and its avoidance in a way which demonstrates his own original and striking creative impulse.<sup>1</sup> I use the term "literary device" to refer to recurrent authorial strategies that shape the structure of the novel, develop dominant themes and guide character development. I discuss the theoretical framework within which I view the literary device in detail in section 0.5.

### 0.2 *Poshlost'* in Russian Thought and Culture

*Poshlost'* has long been an obsession in Russian thought and culture. The word is often translated into English as *banality*, *vulgarity*, *triviality*, *philistinism* and is discussed with reference to overlapping concepts (e.g., *cliché*, *kitsch*). Many authors dispense with single-word renderings of *poshlost'* on account of its untranslatable cultural implications. Mirsky, for

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<sup>1</sup> The many uses of the word *poshlyi* in the original Russian text are almost always rendered as "vulgar" or "banal" in the English translation of *Dar*. There is, in fact, only a single instance in which the very word *poshlost'* is used in the novel's English translation, about halfway through the protagonist's book *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo*: "Knowing how much Turgenev prized every word spoken against Tolstoy, Chernyshevski, in the fifties, freely enlarged upon Tolstoy's *poshlost* (vulgarity) and *hvastovstvo* (bragging)—"the bragging of a thickheaded peacock about a tail which doesn't even cover his vulgar bottom," etc. (250).

instance, renders the word as “self-satisfied inferiority” (158), while Lindstrom offers “complacent mediocrity” (149). Boym offers a lengthier definition of *poshlost’* as “the Russian version of banality, with a characteristic national flavouring of metaphysics and high morality” (41). Boym’s *Common Places* as a whole testifies to the complex cultural and historical implications of the concept. Frolova’s *Vul’garnyi ili poshlyi* (2003), a comparative study of the differing uses of the adjectival form *poshlyi* and the borrowing *vul’garnyi* (*vulgar*) in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, further attests to this complexity. According to Lindstrom (149), Ivan Turgenev was obsessed with conceiving a protagonist who would overcome *poshlost’* or the “moral degradation” he observed in Russian society. In Dostoevskii’s works, *poshlost’* is viewed as an attribute of the devil while Solzhenitsyn attributes the vice to Western youth culture (Boym 41). But *poshlost’* is perhaps most strongly associated with the works of Nikolai Gogol, who was known for an uncanny ability to aestheticize everyday trifles and turn them into grotesque parodies (Mirsky 158). Gogol’s most well-known character Chichikov is often viewed as an incarnation of *poshlost’* (Mirsky 160), and it is Gogol’s treatment of *poshlost’* that has the strongest presence in Nabokov’s thought.

### 0.3 *Poshlost’* in Nabokov’s work

Nabokov’s works of literary criticism are characterized by a preoccupation with *poshlost’*. Nabokov first addresses the concept in the English language in *Nikolai Gogol*, in which he coins the term *poshlust*, a pun on “posh” and “lust.” Nabokov asserts that, in contrast to related terms which suggest a given historical era or denote obvious bad taste, the Russian notion of *poshlost’* is “beautifully timeless” and “often escapes detection” (64). He later revisits the

term in his essay “Philistines and Philistinism” (309-14) and in *Strong Opinions* (100-102, 116-17).

The author’s preoccupation with *poshlost’* is reflected frequently in Nabokov scholarship, for one might suggest that understanding his conception of *poshlost’* is essential to understanding his thinking, ethics and aesthetic values. Scholars of Russian thought and culture often turn to Nabokov’s statements of *poshlost’* as an explanatory aid (e.g., Hutchings 88). Davydov (“Poshlost’” 628-33) provides a concise yet comprehensive overview of Nabokov’s treatment of the term in his non-fictional works. Of course, Nabokov’s use of *poshlost’* is subjective and sometimes elliptical. Rampton (95-96), for instance, observes that Nabokov—in addition to elaborating on things that are trivial, vulgar or crude—uses *poshlost’* to give air to his pronouncements on many things for which he feels a particular loathing. Along the same lines, Davydov (“Poshlost’” 630-31) notes Nabokov’s application of the label to writers or figures who fail to meet the author’s discriminating tastes (e.g., Freud, Sartre, Lawrence, etc.), while Foster (223) suggests that Nabokov’s ambiguous use of the term is a deliberate contrivance meant to appeal to the creative agency of the reader. Boym is critical of Nabokov and accuses him of being drawn into the banality he seeks to condemn while also neglecting to inquire into the actual cultural history of *poshlost’* (41-42).

Most of Nabokov’s fictional works imply the presence of *poshlost’* in some form or another: it is either observed in everyday life (such as in the triteness of advertising), or it is a vice that is attributed to a particular character. Davydov (“Poshlost’” 631) suggests the following examples: Valentinov and Luzhin’s in-laws in *Zashchita Luzhina*, Hermann in *Otchaianie*, the executioner Pierre in *Priglasenie na kazn'*, Paduk, the dictator of the police state, in *Bend*

*Sinister*, the biographer Goodman in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Charlotte Haze and Clare Quilty in *Lolita* and Shchyogolev in *Dar*.

While *poshlost*' in Nabokov's fiction is often addressed in passing, I am interested in a more explicit examination of the concept. Ole Nyegaard's work (2004) on the use of *poshlost*' as a literary device in *Lolita* is a notable example of such a study. My own approach differs from his in scope and methodology. While Nyegaard examines *poshlost*' as a device for organizing narrator-reader relations in *Lolita*, my study of *Dar* also examines its function as a device of creative instigation.

#### 0.4 Overview of *Dar*

First published serially in *Sovremennye zapiski* in 1938 under the pen-name V. Sirin, *Dar* is Nabokov's final Russian-language novel. The novel's fourth chapter, composed of the protagonist's satirical biography of the progressive writer Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevski, was withheld from publication due to its controversial approach to its subject. The novel's first complete publication came in 1952. In 1963, *Dar* was published in its English translation (with the title *The Gift*), having been translated by the author's son Dmitri Nabokov and Michael Scammell under the supervision of Nabokov himself, who translated the novel's first chapter.

Set in Berlin in the 1920s, *Dar* is the story of an aspiring émigré Russian writer, Fyodor Konstantinovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev. The novel depicts Fyodor's life over a three-year period with a focus on his growth as an artist, which is informed by his engagement with Russian literature. His greatest creative undertaking is the satirical biography of Chernyshevski. Towards the novel's end, Fyodor anticipates his next endeavour: a novel that fictionalizes these crucial

developmental years of his life. The novel also deals with Fyodor's preoccupation with his own mortality, cultural isolation (as demonstrated by his relationship with native Berliners), his relationship with the Russian émigré community and his growing romance with Zina Mertz, who comes to serve as his muse.

Despite the critical silence with which *Dar* was received upon its initial publication, it is today the most highly regarded of Nabokov's Russian-language novels (see e.g., Field 249; Lee 80; Dolinin 135). *Dar* is often considered an example of a *Künstlerroman*—a novel that depicts the artist in the process of actualization. Lee compares the novel to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* while noting that *Dar* is, by contrast, more concerned with the actual process of creation than Joyce's work is (81). In the broadest sense, the novel certainly adheres to the basic conventions of the *Künstlerroman*, especially with respect to its protagonist's acute self-awareness, which can be regarded as a “distinguishing feature of the artistic sensibility” (Malmgren 8). Fyodor also reflects other common traits of the artist as a character in fiction. Beebe identifies such features as an acute perceptiveness of the world, a sense of divided self and a striving for immortality (5-13), all of which can be held to apply to Fyodor. *Dar*, however, is distinctive in its composition in that it is heavily suffused with its hero's own creative experiments, which constitute a large part of the narrative.

Just about all scholarly works on *Dar* attest to the work's rich thematic diversity and daunting complexity. Other aspects of the novel addressed in existing studies include aesthetic questions regarding the difference between “pure art” and “pseudo” or “anti-art” (e.g., Rampton 71-92), and the philosophy of reading (e.g., Blackwell 2000). Also of interest is the novel's peculiar narrative stance, which never assumes a consistent viewpoint. Connolly notes the shifts

between what he terms the “autobiographic intrinsic” narrator and an “extrinsic third-person” point of view (*Patterns* 197). Other studies examine the novel in terms of its polemic with Russian literary criticism (Dolinin 142-44). Simon Karlinsky’s structural study examines *Dar* as a hybrid of fiction and criticism. How Nabokov establishes his protagonist’s dialogue with other Russian literary figures constitutes the novel’s chief distinctive feature within the context of the *Künstlerroman*.

Naturally, the scholarly works on *Dar* that have the greatest relevance to the present study are those that deal with the novel in relation to *poshlost’*. Thus, Davydov’s and Blackwell’s works (“Exorcism” and *Zina’s Paradox* respectively) are worth mentioning with respect to the approach I propose here. Davydov’s article devotes some discussion to Fyodor’s artistic self-actualization through the “aesthetic exorcism” of Chernyshevski (363-68) and to Fyodor’s reading of Gogol, whose works offer the ideal exercise in both detecting *poshlost’* and mocking its manifestations and perpetrators (359).

Of particular interest in Blackwell’s work is his discussion of Nabokov’s relationship with Russian émigré critic Iulii Aikhenval’d (25-36). This discussion has in common with my own study the matters of reader agency, as well as the life, energy and timelessness of the artistic text (31-32). My aims are, to an extent, similar to those in *Zina’s Paradox*, which Blackwell presents as a work of scholarship devoted to examining the features that contribute to the innovative qualities of *Dar* as a twentieth-century novel (10). However, while both authors address the concept of *poshlost’* in their discussions, neither Davydov’s nor Blackwell’s works treat it as topic of exclusive interest. My contribution in focusing specifically on *poshlost’* is to foreground it not merely as an informative theme or cultural concept in the novel, but also as a

formative device that guides the protagonist's creative development in a manner that contributes to the innovative qualities of the text. Just as Blackwell (3) deems *Dar* a "paradoxical" novel in many respects, I argue that *poshlost'* assumes a paradoxical quality within the text: it serves as both the antithesis to and instigator of creative artifice.

## 0.5 Theoretical Approach

An additional aim of this thesis is to extend Lotman's semiotic textual theories to the study of Nabokov's works. Michael Glynn's study (23-51) offers an informative look at Russian Formalist influences in Nabokov's works. This study provides valuable insights into how Nabokov's work demonstrates the "laying bare of the device" (*obnazhenie priema* [see Erlich 190]). Glynn's study is worth mentioning for my purposes given the Formalist antecedents of Lotman's thinking (see Shukman 38-45). I refer to Russian Formalist conceptions as a means of contextualizing my Lotmanian approach to the text.

Since the focus of my thesis is how *poshlost'* is employed by Nabokov as a literary device (*khudozhestvennyi priem*), I should clarify how I employ this term. Previously I referred to Nyegaard's study which takes a similar approach to an analysis of *Lolita*. While I acknowledge Nyegaard's insights, he does not necessarily qualify his use of the term "literary device." To an extent, I use the concept of the literary device within a Russian Formalist context, specifically with respect to art's function as a renewal of perception. Birnbaum defines the literary device as "a means of shaping and reshaping the semiotic structure of given text to achieve a higher artistic quality" (149). As Birnbaum also notes, many theorists, including Lotman, do not confine themselves to such a narrow conception of the literary device. Lotman's conception of the device is a context-laden notion; it assumes meaning as a *relational* construct

(*Struktura* 121-22). Margolin defines Lotman's relational conception of the literary device as "a function or relation between the text and something outside of it, not an independent property of the text. Any element in a text can serve as a device, depending on the specific code which is brought to bear upon this text" (273). I emphasize that the cultural concept of *poshlost'* should not be considered in essentialist terms. Just as its employment as a device is context-dependent, the meaning of *poshlost'* is rooted a given historical era and varies according to an author's individual aesthetic, ideological or moral values (see Section 0.2).<sup>2</sup>

I will provide an analysis of how *poshlost'* functions as a literary device throughout the text, specifically in terms of how it contributes to fulfilling, but also defying compositional features of a *Künstlerroman*. In *Dar*, Nabokov and his protagonist acknowledge literary predecessors whilst aspiring to aesthetic innovation. I will first examine how Nabokov employs the conception of *poshlost'* as a means of individuation and establishing semiotic boundaries. Fyodor's perception of banality in everyday life as well as in inferior art sets him apart from most of his contemporaries. In this respect, the author's individuation from others conforms to one common convention of the *Künstlerroman*: the depiction of the artist as an outsider (Malmgren 8). The artist's aloofness from others is conflated with an estrangement from the everyday and the commonplace. However, this process of artistic individuation through merely discerning or assigning the attribute of *poshlost'* often proves to be less clear-cut than one might initially suppose.

My approach to Nabokov's novel emphasizes Lotman's conception of the artistic text as a system that models the author's consciousness (Shukman 46-47). To a certain extent, one could

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<sup>2</sup> For further reading on how the concept of *poshlost'* has evolved since the nineteenth century, see Boym 42-66.



say that Nabokov's conception of *poshlost'* testifies to Lotman's view of the text, in that it serves as a vehicle for the author's aesthetic values. However, the way in which the device functions varies across different texts as well as through the course of a single text: this is certainly the case in *Dar*, especially as it applies the development of Fyodor's artistic consciousness. Such a contrast can be observed when Nabokov's characters, rightly or wrongly, attribute *poshlost'* to others. In this respect, I will examine the device's function as a means of misdirection.

Lotman's conception of the artistic text is strongly reader-oriented. I will therefore examine *Dar* in terms of Lotman's ideas about the text's relation to its readership, considering both relations between Nabokov and the fictional Fyodor and their readership. I will employ Lotman's theories of creative innovation within the context of a given work's actualization in the consciousness of the reader. I will also examine the novel in terms of what Lotman calls the *aesthetics of identity* and the *aesthetics of contrast*. The aesthetics of identity refers to works of art that tend towards abstraction, generalization or stereotyping, whereas the aesthetics of contrast describes works that tend towards complexity and novelty (*Lektsii* 172-76). In Lotman's terms, the entropic value and illusory uniqueness of an artistic text can be attributed, in part, to varying degrees of coincidence and non-coincidence between the codes of the author and reader (*Struktura* 32). Lotman also employs the concept of *entropy* (borrowed from information theory) which refers to the level of unpredictability, and thus higher information, of an artistic message (see *Struktura* 36-43).

In examining the reorganization of the protagonist's consciousness, I will refer to Lotman's notion of *autocommunication* which refers to a communicative act wherein the self is both addresser and addressee, a process that leads to a semiotic restructuring of the self

(*Semiosfera* 165). A distinguishing feature of communication with one's self is that the message is relayed across time rather than space (*Semiosfera* 164). In *Dar*, this process leads to a development of Fyodor's artistic consciousness and facilitates the movement of the *Künstlerroman*. I argue that Fyodor's cognizance of his inner philistine or *poshliak* is a continuous act of autocommunication that guides his maturation as an artist. I take this to be the most important means by which the novel achieves its innovative quality, especially given Nabokov's emphasis on Fyodor's future self. I will therefore argue that the innovative qualities of *Dar* as a *Künstlerroman* are derived not just from the protagonist's acute self-awareness, but from an awareness of his future self.

#### 0.6 Structure of Thesis

This thesis is divided into three primary chapters. Chapter One examines the immediate demarcating function that *poshlost'* serves within the novel. I will examine this function of the device in terms of Lotman's conception of semiotic boundaries and individuation. However, as I have emphasized, Lotman views the literary device in a nuanced and relational manner, and so the conception of the boundary in *Dar* is constantly redefined and renegotiated throughout the novel. I will examine the boundary in terms of its cultural, aesthetic and interpersonal aspects and discuss how these bear upon Fyodor's autonomy as an artist.

In Chapter Two, I will examine Fyodor's simultaneous position as both reader and writer. Here I will examine the young author's position towards his future readers and the development of his authorial personality through reading, especially in terms of his own readings of Chernyshevski.

Chapter Three will assess the role that Fyodor's perception of banality or conventionality assumes within his own consciousness and how these perceptions influence his work. I will examine this process specifically with reference to Lotman's conception of autocommunication in the development of the creative consciousness. I will argue that, in addition to constituting an example of autocommunication, *Dar* attests to a covert awareness of intrapersonal communication with respect to the author as well as to the hero. I will conclude my thesis with a summary of my findings and suggestions for future research.

## Chapter One: Boundaries and Semiotic Individuation

### 1.1 Introduction

This section will address semiotic boundaries and individuation as aspects of how *poshlost'* functions as a device in *Dar*. I will first examine the basic cultural boundary at work in the novel, the boundary between Russian and German culture, with an emphasis on Fyodor's overall position. I will then examine how Nabokov models Berlin and its Russian émigré community in the text and then I will then move on to the subject of Fyodor's interpersonal relationships with other Russian exiles. I will then assess how the novel treats the renegotiation of boundaries and their ambivalent nature. I will conclude this chapter with a summary of the previous subsections and a discussion of how the demarcating function of *poshlost'* is related to Fyodor's artistic maturation.

### 1.2 The Cultural Boundary

The foreign setting of *Dar* serves as a basis for considering Lotman's notion of the semiotic boundary, which in turn provides an opportunity for examining the cultural connotations of *poshlost'*. Fyodor's daily interactions with the local Berlin populace often bring out the young author's sense of alienation. Consequently, the author's native literature serves as both a source of solace and a means of bolstering his sense of self in a foreign setting. From the novel's very beginning, this cultural divide is established. When establishing the date of the opening scene, the author inserts the following parenthetical interjection:

иностранный критик заметил как-то, что хотя многие романы, все немецкие например, начинаются с даты, только русские авторы—в силу оригинальной честности *нашей литературы*—не договаривают единиц. (5) [emphasis added]<sup>3</sup>

The “first-person” aspect of the cultural semiotic boundary is evident in this parenthetical aside, which demonstrates the value the author places upon the “distinct honesty” of Russian literature. Despite the distance Fyodor maintains from the Russian émigré community, the author’s qualification of “*our literature*” (“*nasha literatura*”) emphasizes a certain measure of cultural identification of a “first-person” nature (*Semiosfera* 257). That Fyodor is inclined towards cultural identification is one indicator that individual identity is conceived in cultural semiotic space. However, as Blackwell notes, the Russian nationalist sentiments of the novel are illusory and often subject to “ironic reversals,” particularly in the form of Fyodor’s apparent anti-German sentiments (*Zina’s Paradox* 143).

The novel’s setting of Berlin not only serves to emphasize the theme of alienation experienced by Fyodor and Russian émigrés alike, but it also has the reverse function of emphasizing the alterity of Berlin’s natives. Perhaps the best demonstration of this tendency is the novel’s depiction of Fyodor’s internal hostility towards a commuter who bumps into him on a crowded tram. (See Chapter Three section 3.1 for a more detailed discussion.) Fyodor’s impulse to associate the rude commuter with *poshlost’* is derived from a Russian tendency to attribute this qualification to all Germans. The self-reproach Fyodor feels as a result—his realization that such thoughts are “unworthy of an artist” (81)—underscores his defensive reification of the bounds of one’s own cultural space and the very abstractions he frequently

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<sup>3</sup> “[A] foreign critic once remarked that while many novels, most German ones for example, begin with a date, it is only Russian authors who, in keeping with the honesty peculiar to our literature, omit the final digit” (3).

condemns. The conviction that attributes *poshlost'* towards German culture exposes Fyodor's prejudices, and indeed Nabokov explicitly addresses such prejudices in his foreword to the English-language translation of *Dar*:

Fyodor's attitude towards Germany reflects too typically perhaps the crude and irrational contempt that Russian émigrés had for the natives (in Berlin, Paris or Prague). My young man is moreover influenced by the rise of a nauseous dictatorship belonging to the period when the novel was written and not to the one it patchily reflects. (n. pag.)

The general contempt that Russian émigrés are said to harbour towards the natives of a given nation perhaps requires little elaboration in light of Lotman's assertion that all that is perceived as exterior to the collective first-person semiosphere is regarded as "alien," "hostile" or "disorganized" (*Semiosfera* 257).

The second part of Nabokov's remarks on Fyodor's anti-German attitudes in the foreword to the English translation of *Dar* refer to extra-literary factors at the time of its writing (the Nazi era) rather than its implied literary setting (the Weimar era). Rather than merely being seen as an indictment of Nazism, this scene can also be considered with reference to Nabokov's assertion that the danger of *poshlost'* is often immanent at times of social upheaval or war, when national and cultural allegiances are emphasized. "To exaggerate the worthlessness of a country at the awkward moment when one is at war with it," states Nabokov, "[...] means walking dangerously close to that abyss of *poshlust* which yawns so universally at times of revolution or war" (*Nikolai Gogol* 65). Thus Fyodor's wielding of the label says more about his own *poshlost'* than it does about Germany as a nation at any particular historical era. It would be useful to

elaborate further on Nabokov's comments on the notion of *poshlost'* in German culture with the following excerpt from *Nikolai Gogol*:

Among the nations with which we came into contact, Germany had always seemed to us a country where *poshlost'*, instead of being mocked, was one of the essential parts of the national spirit, habits, traditions and general atmosphere, although at the same time well-meaning Russian intellectuals of a more romantic type readily, too rapidly, adopted the legend of the greatness of German philosophy and literature; for it takes a super-Russian to admit that there is a dreadful streak of *poshlost'* running through Goethe's *Faust*. (64)

Nabokov's treatment of the "innate" *poshlost'* of German culture elucidates the cultural dimension of Fyodor's prejudice. The conviction that *poshlost'* is "one of the essential parts of the national spirit [of Germany]" is presented as a characteristically Russian notion. That Fyodor resorts to the "Russian conviction" of inherent German *poshlost'* testifies to artistic laziness. "Fyodor's art," observes Boyd, "advances immeasurably when he rejects the easy idyll" (464). Since this contempt for German culture is historically embedded in Russian thought and culture (see Sazonova 1945), "no particular shrewdness is required" for its detection (*Nikolai Gogol* 64). Fyodor's "biased indictment" (82) is based on conventional attitudes and stereotypical impressions. This certainly bears out Nabokov's testimonial to the universality of *poshlost'*—a notion that transcends class and national boundaries ("Philistines and Philistinism" 310). Moreover, the appeal to stereotypes or preconceived notions can be viewed as having an automatizing effect on perception. Leerssen touches on the eroding force of such stereotyped perceptions: "stereotypes and clichés are the end products of a long process of stylistic attrition,

debased echoes of something that lost its originality and expressive power long ago” (693). The threat of such “stylistic attrition” underlies Fyodor’s self-rebuke.

According to Blackwell, *Dar* “promotes the conception that Russocentrism, and indeed any metaphysical nationalism or other ideological blindness, is an impediment to freedom, spiritual fulfilment, and the achievement of human potential” (*Zina’s Paradox* 24). It would thus seem that Nabokov offers a covert indictment of Russocentrism and nationalism in general in his novel. Boym, however, suggests that Nabokov actually implicates himself in the very Russian banality he attempts to elucidate: “In identifying *poshlost*’ as a key critical category, Nabokov inadvertently identifies *with* the Russian intellectual obsession—the critique of banality” (41-42). In addition, Boym notes that most of Nabokov’s defining examples are German. However, it is worth noting that in *Nikolai Gogol*, Nabokov possesses a deniable relationship with the “Nabokov” of the biography (Bowie 258). I will defer a more detailed discussion of “deniability” to Section 2.2.1.

However, as with many boundaries in *Dar*, the cultural one is not clearly delineated in the character of Fyodor who, unlike Nabokov himself, is endowed with a command of the German language (64). Thus, to a certain extent, Fyodor is entrenched in the very culture he often finds himself condemning. What often results from Fyodor’s responses to such an alien city is a transposition of his own sentiments onto his surroundings. He notices, for instance, that his landlady’s name Klara Stoboy evokes a peculiar impression in him, for in Russian it sounds very much in like “Klara s toboi” (“Klara is with thee”), in which he hears a sound of “sentimental firmness” (“zvuk sentimental’nogo zavereniia” [9]).



The treatment of culturally-mediated nostalgia is an ambivalent concept in Nabokov's fiction. While Nabokov and his protagonists often profess a yearning for their lost homeland, settings that are often theatrically Russified are implied to be *poshlye* by virtue of their false and exaggerated character. One example of such a cultural transposition is the Russian bakery which is depicted as a sort "museum of curiosities" of the old country's cuisine ("kunstkamer[a] otechestvennoi gastronomii" [28]). Authenticity is only ever attributed to individual conceptualizations of one's homeland, a homeland which, in a sense, no longer exists. The materiality and falsity of the emulation by the émigré community collectively is a poor compromise for Fyodor's intensely individual experience of his lost homeland, which he believes can still be accessed through art: "Mne-to, konechno, legche, chem drugomu, zhit' vne Rossii, potomu chto ia naverianka znaiu, chto vernus' [...] potomu chto vse ravno kogda cherez sto, cherez dvesti let,—budu zhit' tam v svoix knigakh" (317).<sup>4</sup>

In its broadest sense, the boundary as it is implied in *Dar* functions along with Fyodor's culturally mediated prejudices. His impulse of attributing *poshlost'* so flippantly to Berliners incriminates him in the very banality he seeks to condemn. Though he is aware of the implications of his attitude towards this boundary, there is no explicit indication that he moves completely beyond these convictions by the end of the novel. Fyodor's subsequent rebuke to himself for harbouring such prejudices demonstrates the cultural, extra-literary aspect of *poshlost'* bearing upon its function as a device. That said, while towards the novel's end Fyodor still regards Berlin as a city "where everything is alien and repulsive to me" (350), he nonetheless comes to see the value of his isolation:

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<sup>4</sup> "It's easier for me, of course, than for another to live outside Russia, because I know for certain that I shall return [...] because, no matter when, in a hundred, two hundred years—I shall live there in my books" (350).

Да, я бы давно уехал, но есть некоторые личные обстоятельства (не говоря о моем чудном здесь одиночестве, о чудном благотворном контрасте между моим внутренним обыкновением и страшно холодным миром вокруг; знаешь, ведь в холодных странах теплее, в комнатах; конопатят и топят лучше) (317).<sup>5</sup>

That Fyodor considers his solitude “beneficent” (“blagotvornyi”) emphasizes the value that he places upon his own individual space. While it is clear that Fyodor cherishes his solitude as an aspect of his creativity, it is established that this is not Fyodor’s only reason for remaining in Berlin. Fyodor not only establishes boundaries but he often exaggerates them. In this instance, Fyodor attempts to divert his mother’s, as well as the reader’s, attention away from somewhat more obvious reasons for remaining in the city— specifically his financial state and his relationship with Zina.

### 1.3 The Russian Émigré Community in *Dar*

The immediate cultural boundary is only one aspect of Fyodor’s semiotic individuation. In addition to external boundaries between cultures, every semiosphere is permeated by internal boundaries as well. I will look briefly at the Russian émigré community in Western Europe and the intense debate surrounding its self-definition. However, I will focus my discussion less on the Russian émigré literary community as a cultural movement in itself and more on how Nabokov represents this phenomenon within *Dar*. In Lotman’s terms, I will examine how the émigré community is *modelled* in the fictional world of the novel.

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<sup>5</sup> “Yes, I would have left long ago, but there are certain personal circumstances (not to mention my wonderful solitude in this country, the wonderful beneficent contrast between my inner habitus and the terribly cold world around me; you know in cold countries houses are warmer than in the south, better insulated and heated)” (350).

The Russian émigré community in Western Europe represented a segment of Russian society relegated to the periphery in a semiotic as well as a geographic sense. As Blackwell notes (*Zina's Paradox* 14), many of those forced out of Russia by the Bolsheviks viewed themselves as “the primary culture bearers” and “assumed the immense responsibility of ‘preserving’ the heritage of the Great Russian Culture.” To a certain extent, Nabokov can be said to hold this view by virtue of his pronouncements on the Soviet Union, a country which “has stopped noticing *poshlism*” (“Philistines and Philistinism” 313). Such sentiments are effectively mirrored by the bitter impressions Fyodor feels upon reading the Soviet chess magazine *8 x 8*: “Vdrug emu stalo obidno—otchego eto v Rossii vse sdelaos’ takim plokhon’kim, koriavym, serym, kak ona mogla tak obolvanit’sia i pritupit’sia?” (158).<sup>6</sup>

In *Dar*’s portrayal of Berlin’s Russian literary community, Fyodor is indifferent to the collective interests of the émigré writers’ union. Fyodor’s equation of individuality with originality reflects, on another level, Lotman’s position that peripheral genres of art tend more towards innovation than central ones (*Semiosfera* 259-60). The distance he maintains from the group interests of the émigré community is, for him, instrumental in maintaining and cultivating his individual creativity. The one friendship Fyodor does cherish is with Koncheyev, which is only ever experienced as a transcendent, literary and imaginary relationship:

То, что я вас так хорошо знаю, в сущности, не зная вас вовсе, невероятно меня радует, ибо, значит, есть союзы в мире, которые не зависят ни от каких-то дубовых дружб, ослиных симпатий “веяний века,” ни от каких духовных организаций или

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<sup>6</sup> “Suddenly he felt a bitter pang—why had everything in Russia become so shoddy, so crabbed and grey, how could she have been so fooled and befuddled?” (175)

сообществ поэтов, где дюжина крепко сплоченных бездарностей общими усилиями  
“горит.” (308)<sup>7</sup>

This passage also emphasizes Fyodor’s conception of organizations or unions of writers as places where mediocrity thrives. Juxtaposed with this aversion to groups of artists is Fyodor’s critical stance towards notions of the “spirit of the age” (“veianii veka”), the conception of which, for Fyodor, entails the banality of abstraction.

What is of greater interest in terms of the demarcating effect of *poshlost’* is not necessarily Berlin’s émigré literary community proper but rather how Nabokov represents this setting in the novel itself. What is most significant is how the literary community is conceived within the consciousness of the author, how it is deformed or modelled, and how it is ultimately actualized in the text itself. Lotman’s conception of art as a secondary modelling system is worth noting in this regard (*Struktura* 16-17). In this respect, we can at least agree with Nabokov’s assertion that the artist essentially creates or recreates the world itself, although it is essential to remain critical of the author’s position that the world created within the text has nothing in common with reality (*Literature* 1). While Russian émigré literature and its discursive environment constitutes a real cultural and linguistic phenomenon, it is rendered in the novel in terms of the *secondary modelling system* of art. Nabokov’s assertion that such worlds as created by the artist have nothing to do with “our own” world disregards the meaning that an artistic text assumes in relation to that which it deforms or alters in the process of reflection or recreation. While a *primary modelling system* such as, for instance, a cultural or literary historical account

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<sup>7</sup> “The fact that I know you so well without knowing you makes me unbelievably happy, for that means there are unions in the world which don’t depend at all on massive friendships, asinine affinities or ‘the spirit of the age,’ nor on any mystical organizations or associations of poets where a dozen tightly knit mediocrities ‘glow’ by their common efforts” (341).

of the Russian émigré community aims for precision in representation, the secondary modelling system of art employs what it derives from the primary modelling system in a way that is aesthetically meaningful.

Fyodor's few actual instances of involvement in the affairs of the community strategically occur before his mental exchanges with Koncheyev. In both cases, the meetings themselves are portrayed in a markedly contemptuous manner. In the first chapter, Herman Ivanovich Busch's disastrous reading of his "philosophical tragedy" assumes a palpably comic sense of *poshlost'*. It is clear from the very beginning of Busch's reading that it is bound for a humiliating failure:

Курьезное произношение чтеца было носовместимо с темнотою смысла. Когда, еще в прологе, появился идущий по дороге Одинокий Спутник, Федор Константинович напрасно понадеялся, что это метафизический парадокс, а не предательский ляпсус. (61)<sup>8</sup>

What then follows is an elaborate description of the boredom and discomfort of the audience, which is not without its humour. Despite the émigré newspaper editor Vasilev's preliminary glance over the play, he allows Busch to read his work nonetheless, much to Alexandra Chernyshevski's chagrin (64). It is implied earlier on that Vasilev is not a man of discriminating tastes (if he possesses any artistic sense at all), especially given his willingness to publish

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<sup>8</sup> "The Rigan's farcical accent and bizarre solecisms were incompatible with the obscurity of his meaning. When, already in the Prologue, there appeared a "Lone Companion" (*odinokiy sputnik* instead of *odinokiy putnik*, lone wayfarer) walking along that road, Fyodor still hoped against hope that this was a metaphysical paradox and not just a traitorous *lapsus*" (66).

Fyodor's work without even reading it: "emu bylo reshitel'no vse ravno, chem ukrashaetsia nepoliticheskaia chast' *Gazety*" (57).<sup>9</sup>

Fyodor's overall indifference to the activities of the Society of Russian Writers is perhaps best demonstrated by his exchange with Shirin, another mediocre writer who tries to convince Fyodor to stand as a candidate for election in the Society's inspection committee. Fyodor listens to Shirin express his outrage at a scandal involving the mishandling of the Union's funds. It is clear from the entire exchange that Fyodor's regards Shirin and the workings of the committee with contemptuous amusement. Shirin himself is a rather slow-witted man with poor vision and hearing, traits which coincide with his artistic shortcomings. Shirin is, in a sense, an embodiment of Fyodor's designation of Chernyshevski as a "myopic materialist" ("blizorukii materialist" [201]). In addition, Fyodor's contempt for Shirin is extended to the latter's preoccupation with administrative trifles in which Fyodor has no interest: "Vot uzhe neskol'ko vremeni, kak nachalas' dovol'no zabavnaia (po mneniuu Fedora Konstantinovicha) i absolutno neprilichnaia (po terminologii Shirina) istoriia s kassoi Soiuza" (285).<sup>10</sup>

The meeting of the Society of Russian Writers in the novel's final chapter is depicted in a similarly humorous manner. After the meeting has addressed a few administrative and financial matters, Shirin is permitted to deliver a speech which is interrupted by several outbursts. An argument breaks out, and it is revealed that several other candidates aim to seize control of the inspection committee, a development which dashes Shirin's hopes of reform. Fyodor takes the

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<sup>9</sup> "[I]t was absolutely immaterial to him what adorned the non-political part of his paper" (62).

<sup>10</sup> "For some past now a rather comical (in Fyodor's opinion) and absolutely outrageous (in Shirin's terminology) affair had been going on with the Union's funds" (317).

announcement of a short recess as an opportunity to leave before the elections, and he regrets that he sacrificed his nightly meeting with Zina for the farce of the committee proceedings.

Some noteworthy parallels are established between different types of boundaries. The mob-like depiction of the writer's union and its material affairs, for instance, is reflected at cultural and political levels. The following depiction of national festivities in Berlin, attests to these similarities:

Из окон домов торчали трех сортов флаги: черно-желто-красные, черно-бело-красные и просто красные: каждый сорт что-то означал, а смешнее всего: это что то кого-то могло волновать гордостью или злобой. Были флаги большие и малые, на коротких древках и на длинных, но от всего этого экибиционизма гражданского возбуждения город не стал привлекательнее. [...] Вдруг он представил себе казенные фестивалы в России, долгополых солдат, культ скул, исполинский плакат с орущим общим местом в ленинском пиджачке и кепке, и среди грома глупости, литавров скуки, рабьих великолепий,—маленький ярмарочный писк грошовой истины. (324-25)<sup>11</sup>

This passage elucidates the essence of Fyodor's disdain for group thought and mob mentality. He ridicules the superficiality of the displays on the national holiday—i.e., the fact that flags of a certain colour could evoke pride or hatred (just as petty administrative matters provoke so much

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<sup>11</sup> “Three kinds of flags were sticking out of the house windows: black-yellow-red, black-white-red, and plain red; each one meant something, and funniest of all, this something was able to excite pride or hatred in someone. There were large flags and small flags, on short poles and on long ones, but none of this exhibitionism of civic excitement made the city any more attractive [...] Suddenly he imagined official festivals in Russia, soldiers in long-skirted overcoats, the cult of firm jaws, a gigantic placard with a vociferous cliché clad in Lenin's jacket and cap, and amidst the thunder of stupidities, the kettledrums of boredom, and slave-pleasing splendors—a little squeak of cheap truth” (358).

outrage in Shirin). The civic festivities in Berlin are further equated with the sham of Soviet propaganda, which suggests only “cheap truth” (358).

The most consistent manifestation of *poshlost*’ throughout the novel is in the form of groups or large masses. In this respect, there is a generalization of all forms of group identification. The demarcation of Fyodor’s personal space from the immediate émigré community overlaps with the demarcation of other kinds of boundaries, aesthetic, political and national. For Nabokov, the emphasis on the mass over the individual is one of the most insidious guises of *poshlost*’, and is evoked elsewhere in his fiction. Nyegaard, for instance, observes such philistine manifestations in an episode from *Pnin* in which the title character is introduced to the audience before delivering a lecture to a women’s club meeting: “Philistinian rules of society resemble religious rituals...The dogma believed in is not that of the Church Fathers but the dogma of preconceived ideas, *idées reçues*, and the communion is not with the Holy Spirit, or any such concept, but with the spirit of the group” (342-43). Like the committee meeting, this instance is relatively harmless. But while both are depicted as comically idiotic, they are similar in essence to their more sinister manifestations.

What is most significant about how *Dar* represents Berlin’s Russian émigré community of writers is how Nabokov aestheticizes the petty trifles of its day-to-day activities: the pleasure Fyodor takes in rejecting its attempts to intrude into his own private sphere is a key facet of his character and of his aesthetics. Naturally, though, his individuation in relation to any and all group affiliations is mediated to a great extent by his interactions with the individuals who compose such groups, and so I will now turn to a more detailed discussion of the interpersonal level of his semiotic demarcation.



#### 1.4 Interpersonal Boundaries

In Hagglund's survey of the intense debate within the Russian émigré community during 1928, Nabokov is absent from the discussion amongst major émigré figures, chiefly Osorgin, Adamovich, Khodosevich and Gippius. One of the central questions of these debates was whether or not "serious" literary criticism did or even could exist in exile. As Hagglund notes, criticism tended towards either mutual hostility or excessive cordiality that stifled any worthwhile discussion (517). As Dolinin notes (142-43), *Dar* engages with this debate on a fictional level, albeit in a manner that stresses the individualism of the protagonist. Blackwell argues that *Dar* approaches the problems faced by Russian writers in exile by establishing the relation to one's homeland as a profoundly personal affair, not as a matter of geography (*Zina's Paradox* 19).

There are some parallels between Nabokov's relationship to the Russian émigré literary community and how it is modelled in *Dar*. To a certain extent, Fyodor can be taken to reflect some of Nabokov's own efforts to develop his own authorial voice amidst the turbulent discourse surrounding the émigré community's attempts at self-definition within the broader scheme of Russian literature. In *Dar*, many of Fyodor's artistic meditations are accomplished in solitude and at a distance from the émigré community. Even his interaction with other Russian exiles in Berlin evokes a response of alterity. Schönle, in a comparative study of Lotman and Greenblatt, characterizes their account of the self as a development within a medium of competing discourses:

The self [...] is not entirely a product of social discourses, even though it is subject to intense pressures and faces drastic limitations in the range of its choices. [...] The author

is alive and well, even though he or she has to fight for a place in the sun in an environment of harshly competing discourses. (62)

While Lotman discusses the notion of boundary mainly in terms of the collective “we” rather than the individual “I” first-person sense, the singular “I” aspect of the boundary is implied. Essentially, individual consciousness can only take place within cultural semiotic space. As Andrews explains, “[as] new information and texts are created, so is *individual* and *collective* consciousness in cultural space” (48) [italics added]. Likewise, Fyodor’s individual creative consciousness exists and develops within a cultural medium. Fyodor’s sense of self, as defined through aesthetic values, is bound to how he internalizes and evaluates given cultural texts. Here, the individual aspect of cultural identity assumes greater significance in terms of the individual’s struggle against the very cultural space that actually comprises one’s cognition of individuality.

The notion of culture in terms of *culturedness* or snobbishness can be observed in many of Nabokov’s protagonists, who often profess or aspire to some degree of cultural refinement and are “often quick to decry the philistine” (Nyegaard 354). I have already discussed the basic divide between Russian and German culture; in this sense, Fyodor is individualized by his culture as a Russian as well as his overall disposition towards Germans and, even more so, his own misgivings about such attitudes. Fyodor’s character is thus further developed through his relationship to the Russian émigré community and through his interactions with individual Russian émigrés.

In Nabokov’s fiction, individual semiotic space is especially significant when the protagonist is an artist in some respect. The demarcation of this individual space is often established by means of the protagonist’s assumed level of cultural refinement and

uncompromising aesthetic values. Again, Nyegaard's study on *Lolita* provides some valuable insights. Here Nyegaard discusses the function of *poshlost'* as a device that establishes character relations, specifically with respect to the role that Humbert Humbert's assumed level of cultural refinement plays in manipulating the reader's sympathies. The following excerpt, in which Nyegaard discusses Humbert's efforts to dismiss Charlotte Haze as a mere type and deprive her of essential human qualities, is comparable to my own discussion of Fyodor's relationship to other characters in *Dar*.

Charlotte is a disciple of the book club or any other women's club, an avid reader of ladies magazines, and books on interior decoration, in a word: an arch- *poshlyaka* and consequently without a soul. Humbert expertly depicts her essential philistine traits and equates them with her loneliness and longing. Both the *poshlust* and her emotional insecurity in the presence of a single male [...] appear hideous to him and are, as a narrative strategy, used to turn the reader against her. By predisposing the reader, Humbert downplays his later cruelty towards Charlotte. The reader only learns indirectly of her distress and her position, while Humbert does all he can to present her as a type. (355)

Similarly, the character of Yasha Chernyshevski is presented by Fyodor as a mere "type" to the reader. Fyodor's resentment for inferior art hardly differs from his contempt for those who create it. Of Mme. Chernyshevski, for instance, Fyodor feels that "everything that to his mother was filled with enchantment only repelled me" (38). Just as Humbert dismisses Charlotte as a type, so Fyodor does with Yasha. The Chernyshevskis' reverence for their son is dismissed by Fyodor

who, unable to ignore the mediocrity of Yasha's writing, relegates him to the status of a type, thus depriving them of any redeeming, individualizing qualities:

Чем дальше она мне рассказывала о Яше, тем слабее он меня притягивал,—о нет, мы с ним были мало схожи (куда меньше, чем полагала она, во внутрь продлевая совпадение наших внешних черт, которых она к тому же находила больше, чем их было на самом деле, а было, опять-таки, только то небольшое на виду, что соответствовало немногому внутри нас) и едва ли мы подружились бы, встретиться я с ним во время [...] Как поэт он был, по-моему, очень хил; он не творил, он перебивался поэзией, как перебивались тысячи интеллигентных юношей его типа... (36)<sup>12</sup>

The above passage demonstrates a number of parallels to Humbert's dismissal of Charlotte as discussed by Nyegaard. It is worth noting Fyodor's designation of "youths of his type" with respect to the casual writers whom Fyodor derides. As Nyegaard notes, Humbert resorts to a similar tactic of relegating Charlotte to a group of his own invention based on her owning a print of Van Gogh's *Arlesienne*: "By mentioning van Gogh's picture as 'that banal darling of the arty middle class,' he distances himself and the reader from the others by creating a group labeled 'arty middle class.' Charlotte is placed in that group and thereby denied any individual existence" (357). Fyodor's impression of Yasha is also conspicuously defensive in tone and exaggerates the boundary between them. Fyodor's aversion to Yasha emphasizes the latter's

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<sup>12</sup> "The more she continued to tell about Yasha, the less attractive he grew: oh no, he and I bore little resemblance to each other (far less than she supposed, projecting inward the coincidental similarity of external features, of which, moreover, she found additional ones that did not exist—in reality, the little there was within us corresponded to the little there was without), and I doubt we would have become friends if he and I had ever met [...] As a poet he was, in my opinion, very feeble; he did not create, he merely dabbled in poetry, just as thousands of youths of his type did" (38).

presence in Fyodor's consciousness. His preoccupation with Yasha, who is "a mockingly accurate simulacrum of himself" (Greenleaf 150), manifests some of Fyodor's anxieties as an artist.

Another way in which other characters of the novel are presented as alien to Fyodor is through conceptualizing their personalities in the quasi-geographic terms of semiotic space. During Fyodor's visit to the Chernyshevskis' in the first chapter, he imagines himself occupying the worlds of different characters and exploring their personalities as if he were in an exotic land. In this sense, Fyodor's cognition of alterity in these scenes equates an alien personality with an alien culture: "Kogda zhe Fedor Konstantinovich peresazhivalsia v Aleksandru Iakovlevnu Chernyshevskuiu, to popadal v dushu, gde ne vse bylo emu chuzhdo, no gde mnogoe izumlialo ego, kak chopornogo puteshestvennika mogut izumliat' obychai zamorskoj strany" (34).<sup>13</sup>

Fyodor observes a seemingly opposite tendency in Zina's stepfather Shchyogolev, the novel's typical *poshliak* (Davydov, "Poshlost" 631). Shchyogolev, with all his *poshlyi* traits, artlessness and inability to discern detail, resorts to mindlessly anthropomorphizing entire nations when launching into a discussion of world affairs: "Nazvaniia stran i imena ikh glavnykh predstavitelei obrashchalis' u nego vrode kak v iarlyki na bolee ili menee polnykh, no po sushchestvu odinakovykh sosudakh, sodержanie kotorykh on perelival tak i etak" (143).<sup>14</sup> Here Shchyogolev is presented in stark contrast to Fyodor. Even Fyodor's impressions of Mme. Chernyshevski earlier in the novel are at not without sympathy. Shchyogolev, on the other hand, is presented as a true philistine through his artless abstractions: "Slovom—mir sozdavaemyi im,

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<sup>13</sup> "And when Fyodor moved into Mme. Chernyshevski he found himself within a soul where not everything was alien to him, but where he marvelled at many things, as a prim traveller might marvel at the customs in a distant land" (36).

<sup>14</sup> "The names of countries and of their leading representatives became in his hands something in the nature of labels for more or less full but essentially identical vessels, whose contents he poured this way and that." (159)

poluchalsia kakim-to sobranieŋ ogranichennykh, bez'iumornykh, bezlikikh, otvlechennykh drachunov, i chem bol'she on nakhodil v ikh vzaimnykh deistviakh uma, khitrosti, predusmotritel'nosti, tem stanovilsia etot mir glupee, poshlee i proshche" (143).<sup>15</sup> Whereas Fyodor conceptualizes the personality of Mme Chernyshevski in a way that attributes some depth to her character, Shchyogolev's conversely reduces entire nations to simple characters engaged in petty squabbles. Very much like Nikolai Chernyshevski (217), Shchyogolev is depicted as man who perceives the world in terms of abstractions and generalities rather than the precision with which Fyodor sees the world.

### 1.5 Boundaries: Transcendence and Renegotiation

The demarcating aspect of *poshlost'* serves a multisignifying and multipurpose function of the literary device. In the concluding chapter of *Zina's Paradox*, Blackwell offers a comprehensive overview of the boundary motif in *Dar* (141-68) and deems it "one of the most persistent motifs in the novel" (144). In this discussion, he addresses the cultural isolation of the Russian émigré community as well as the relations of art to self, and of reading to writing. Blackwell treats the boundary as an ambivalent notion and argues that "the novel presents and then gestures beyond its own boundaries" (159). The main opposition underlying this discussion is between the limitations of everyday life and boundless potentialities of art (143). One of Blackwell's most noteworthy observations is how the boundary stimulates Fyodor's creative impulse. This can be seen in the boundary between Fyodor's research on Chernyshevski and his actual writing of the biography: he must move beyond the boundary of reading before he can

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<sup>15</sup> "In short, the world Shchyogolev created came out of some kind of collection of humourless, faceless and abstract bullies, and the more brains, cunning and circumspection he found in their mutual activities the more stupid, vulgar and simple his world became" (160).

assume the autonomy of an author (154). This can be further extended to the boundary component that *poshlost'* imposes between genuine art and utilitarian pseudo-art. It is Fyodor's very cognizance of banalities and clichés that provoke his artistic impulses.

While Fyodor certainly strives towards unboundedness in art, it is the imposition of very real boundaries that aids in this striving towards the infinite. This is evident in Fyodor's relationship to other characters, which I discussed in the previous section. As Connolly asserts, "many of Nabokov's characters either try to subordinate others to their own creative designs or withdraw entirely from meaningful interaction with [one] another" (*Patterns* 6). This conception coincides with Lotman's notion of internal boundaries (those *within* the semiosphere), which are "multiple and diverse, and are always being created and destroyed" (Andrews 47). Boundaries are thus renegotiated as Fyodor advances in his creative endeavours. Fyodor frequently renegotiates existing boundaries and his own self-imposed ones. This is also true of the boundary between Fyodor as a character and Fyodor as an author. Connolly, for instance, views the novel's shifting narrative positions between first- and third-person perspective as one expression of Fyodor's advancement towards artistic maturity:

By the time the novel ends, the authorial component within Fyodor has matured to the point where he can break away from the character component and attain the status of authentic author. According to this view, the final lines of the novel mark the point at which the *authorial* element within the figure of Fyodor leaves behind the *character* element and begins its ascent to a higher state of authorial omniscience and control. (199)

This striving towards a higher, boundless reality necessitates a break between the authorial and character components of Fyodor's personality. While Fyodor as an author realizes in his art "a

potential ultimately without limits” (*Zina’s Paradox* 143), the demarcation between author and character or mature and immature is a given, as is the boundary between *poshlyi* pseudo-art and genuine art. What makes the boundary an ambivalent concept is that transcending it is simultaneously an acknowledgement of it.

One consideration that I believe to be lacking from Blackwell’s discussion is any reference to Aikhenval’d, whom he discusses earlier in *Zina’s Paradox* (25-36). Of particular interest here is Aikhenval’d’s essay “Bessmertnaia poshlost’” (“Immortal poshlost’”). I believe that Aikhenval’d is conspicuously absent from Blackwell’s discussion. While it is certainly correct that Fyodor strives for unboundedness in art, this is only one aspect of the argument, especially regarding Aikhenval’d’s testimony to the ontological predicament of man, which is the paradoxical striving towards unity and individuality. This duality corresponds to the opposition between the very necessity of semiotic individuation and the desire for a boundless existence:

Ведь наша одновременная принадлежность двум царствам, царству свободы и царству необходимости, может ощущаться нами как пошлость, извечная космическая пошлость. (19)<sup>16</sup>

Человеку не подобает быть частью, дробью. Человек хочет и должен быть целым. Он мечтает о пантеистическом слиянии с космосом. (25)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> “After all, we may sense our simultaneous belonging to two realms, the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity, as poshlost’, eternal cosmic poshlost’” (Trans. Aylward).

<sup>17</sup> “It does not befit man to be a part, a fraction. Man wants to and must be a whole. He dreams of pantheistic unity with the cosmos” (Trans. Aylward).



Aikhental's discussion of the opposition between freedom (*svoboda*) and necessity (*neobkhodimost'*) parallels Blackwell's assertion that *Dar* acknowledges boundaries whilst implying the protagonist's transcendence of them in his art. In a similar vein, Lotman acknowledges the boundary as an ambivalent notion as it simultaneously divides and unites, and functions as a region of increased semiotic dynamism (*Semiosfera* 262). Likewise, the semiotic activity at the boundary can be considered in light of the stimulating effect *poshlost'* has on Fyodor. That Fyodor derives inspiration from that which most strongly offends his aesthetic sensibilities testifies to this stimulating effect.

In terms of demarcation, *poshlost'* does not serve as a clear-cut divide between the aesthetic values of novel's characters; at times this demarcation is ambivalent and even paradoxical. This is best evidenced by Busch's rather convenient reappearance towards the end of the third chapter. It is clear that Busch is still a mediocre artist who holds a disproportionately high opinion of his talents. He is, in this respect, the direct opposite of Fyodor, who is a gifted but very self-conscious artist. As he relates the synopsis of his upcoming philosophical novel, Busch's platitudes and false profundities are still quite clear to Fyodor. The irony is that Busch is ultimately responsible for finding a publisher for *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* (see page 190 [211]): a mediocre artist thus facilitates the advancement of an author of genius. Their partnership implies that *poshlost'* begets art and does not merely serve as the debasement of it. Just as when Fyodor aestheticizes Nikolai Chernyshevski's marked disregard for style in the interest of polemics, his indebtedness to Busch is a paradoxical manifestation of *poshlost'* as not merely the designation of what is so obviously hackneyed, banal or mediocre. It is worth noting that in Busch's final appearance in the novel at the committee meeting, he is depicted as gazing

“paternally” at Fyodor: “dobreishii Busch, otecheski pogliadyvavshii na Fedora Kostantinovicha” (290).

A further testimony to the paradoxical nature of such boundaries is a critical inability to determine Fyodor’s ideological persuasion. In his review, the fictional Professor Anuchin questions whether Fyodor is on the side of “art for art’s sake.” While it is certainly reasonable to conclude that Fyodor, as well as Nabokov, maintains the essential autonomy of art from utilitarian, didactic or ideological concerns, the very phrase *l’art pour l’art* is arguably itself an empty phrase and an even an *idée reçue*. The values the slogan intends to express are effectively debased through its brevity. In addition, Anuchin’s very designation of a given group of proponents of “art for art’s sake” (“poklonniki iskusstva dlia iskusstva” [276]) constitutes the critic’s frustrated attempt to relegate Fyodor to a convenient aesthetic or ideological position. Even if Fyodor conceded to the validity of the phrase, it would permit an unwanted affiliation with artists who do not necessarily uphold the values the maxim supposedly embodies. In one interview, Nabokov himself quipped, “I do not care for the slogan ‘art for art’s sake’—because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists” (*Strong Opinions* 33). Therefore, Nabokov and Fyodor, while imposing their own boundaries as authors, defy the categories into which their critics attempt to relegate them.

Sergei Davydov provides the elegant analogy of the Möbius band as a means of conceptualizing Nabokov’s relationship with his fictional protagonist (I revisit this analogy in section 2.2.3). I argue that the notion of *poshlost’*, too, as it is appropriated by Nabokov, can be conceptualized in this manner: as a non-orientable surface lacking a clear boundary component.

As the protagonist confronts the notion of *poshlost'* (in literature, in art, in everyday life, etc.), he inadvertently becomes enmeshed in it but, likewise, in one's pursuit of high art, it is just as easy to inadvertently end up on the other "side," i.e., the side of *poshlost'*. Boym is rather critical of Nabokov's attempt's to define and even defeat *poshlost'*: "the moment the famous literary ironist, who takes so much delight in describing *poshlost'* in his novels, attempts to come up with antidotes to it, he too is in danger of falling into the traps of Russian banality" (41). I believe that *Dar*, in addition to numerous other works, attests to Nabokov's awareness of this reality. To aestheticize banality is a simultaneous acknowledgement of *poshlost'* as an inescapable condition.

I have established previously that Boym overstates the equation of Nabokov with the "narrator" of *Nikolai Gogol* (see section 1.2). I add, furthermore, that Nabokov, in fact, does not "identify" with the Russian cultural obsession to the extent that Boym supposes. If anything, Nabokov's conception of *poshlost'* is informed and augmented by an implicit cross-cultural engagement of the concept. In this sense, *poshlost'* (or, more appropriately, *poshlust*) distinguishes Nabokov. While Nabokov's novel attests to his engagement with Russian literature, it also attests to his cultural engagement with other Western European writers. The novel, in fact, implicitly acknowledges Russia's cultural exchange with Europe (Foster, *Memory* 146-56). What heightens the complexity of the use of *poshlost'* as a device within the novel is that it is in the very process of being defined according to the author's and the protagonist's aesthetics. In *Dar*, this development is particularly clear in Fyodor's first imagined exchange with Koncheyev: what appears to be a lively discussion of Russian literature between two like-minded authors actually turns out to be, in part, Fyodor's attempt to define and justify his stance towards various Russian authors.

## 1.6 Conclusion

In this section I have provided an analysis of how Fyodor's thinking and individual artistic development takes place within a broader cultural semiotic medium. To this end, I have shown some of the nuances of the semiotic boundary and just how they are renegotiated throughout the novel. I should emphasize that there is great deal of overlap between the categories into which I have organized the material. However, I believe that this overlap testifies to the multifaceted nature of the boundary—e.g., the simultaneously aesthetic and interpersonal boundary that is established between the Chernyshevskis and Fyodor. Moreover, this testifies to the demarcating or individualizing function of *poshlost'* as well as the complex multisignifying nature of one of its constituent functions. Given the strong cultural connotations of *poshlost'* and its individualizing function in Nabokov's fiction, I believe that I have shown that the cognition of this individualizing aspect can only proceed through the negotiation of cultural semiotic space.

I emphasize here, in concluding, my primary point of contention with respect to the tendency towards the transcendence of boundaries: that despite the novel's preoccupation with the apprehension of an unbounded reality, Fyodor's attempt at reaching it serves to underscore the ontological reality of semiotic individuation.

## Chapter Two: Author and Protagonist, Author and Reader

### 2.1 Introduction

The implications of author-reader (addresser-addressee) relations in Nabokov's works are a topic which has figured prominently in Nabokov's critical writings as well as in the scholarly literature devoted to them. In this chapter, I will discuss the device of *poshlost'* with respect to the interactions between authorial and readership codes. For Lotman, author and reader engage in an act of "mutual activation" (*vzaimnaia aktivnost'*) wherein the text, as a model of the artist's consciousness, possesses its own ideal "readership image" (*obraz auditorii*) and tends towards making the reader conform to itself. The opposite tendency is also at work: readers, possessing their own ideal image of the literary text, conversely attempt to make the text conform to their own system of codes (*Semiosfera* 203).

I will begin by establishing the deniable relationship between Nabokov and his protagonist. To establish my own position, I will draw upon scholarship that attests to a near equivalence between author and protagonist and works that assert, to the contrary, that their relationship is of a greater complexity. In section 2.3, I will discuss the implied readership image in *Dar* and how Fyodor's role as a reader becomes a creative act. In concluding, I will draw the findings from the foregoing analyses together into an assessment of *poshlost'* as it relates to the author's pragmatic considerations of his own readership, and I will comment on how this awareness ultimately pertains to the *perceived* originality of the text itself and its unique actualization in the consciousness of the perceiver.

## 2.2 Author and Protagonist; Criticism and Fiction

### 2.2.1 Nabokov as a Literary Critic

*Dar* presents challenges in distinguishing the aesthetic values of Nabokov from those of Fyodor. Given the reflections of the former in the latter, Fyodor's differences from his creator are worth noting. Before proceeding with any assessment of the novel's prevalent element of literary criticism or examining Fyodor as a representative of his creator's views, it is necessary to take a cursory glance at Nabokov's aesthetic values as they are expounded in his critical works, particularly those collected in *Lectures on Literature* and *Lectures and Russian Literature*.

Nabokov establishes from the outset, as he does in numerous other instances, that his chief interest, aesthetically and pedagogically, is "individual genius and questions of structure" (*Literature* vii), while he denies any interest in a work's social, political or historical background. Nabokov also emphasizes in readers the qualities of imagination, artistic sense and patience, while discouraging generalizations, prejudices and identification with a work's characters (*Literature* 3-5). As a lecturer, Nabokov emphasizes the importance of the reader, "who has saved the artist again and again from being destroyed by emperors, dictators, priests, puritans, philistines, political moralists, policemen, postmasters and prigs" (*Russian Literature* 11). It is clear that Nabokov's pedagogical approach is influenced by his role as an author and what he himself believes to be important in the study of literature. Thus, many of his values regarding the composition of a literary text—the work's form, structure, style and devices employed in achieving its aesthetic effects—rather than its content as expressed through generalizations or "ideas"—are the same values Nabokov employs in the study of the novel (Frank 235). As Fredson Bowers notes, many of Nabokov's lectures themselves possess aesthetic

weight and often endeavour to create “a warm sense of shared experience” between himself and his students (*Russian Literature* xi-xii).

In perhaps the most critical appraisal of Nabokov’s pronouncements on what determines the quality of verbal art, Hugh McLean outlines what he deems “Nabokov’s Laws.” These laws stipulate: 1) that only the greatest works of literature are worthy of study; 2) that details and stylistic elements matter in the work’s study, not general ideas; 3) that the world created by art is autonomous and has nothing to do with the world exterior to the text; and 4) that a natural quality of great art is that it gestures to something *beyond* ordinary life (260-1). McLean’s assessment of Nabokov’s approach to the study of literature is not without criticisms of his apparent biases. Of interest here, especially with regard to Fyodor in *Dar*, is Nabokov’s assertion that art is autonomous from reality. “Art,” states McLean, “creates autonomous imaginary worlds which are not bound by the laws and limitations of one we live in and is not to be judged by them; yet it usually draws on materials taken from this world, and Nabokov is fanatically insistent that these materials should be rendered and visualized with maximal precision” (262).

Additionally, McLean also suggests that Nabokov’s perspective as a novelist intrudes into his pedagogical methods. In one such instance McLean, referring to Nabokov’s lecture on Turgenev, states that his manner suggests “a professional novelist observing how a colleague does his job” (263). Perhaps the most glaring example of Nabokov’s bias is his admitted difficulty with teaching Dostoevskii, a “mediocre” Russian author (*Russian Literature* 98). Nabokov makes very little effort throughout the commentary to conceal his dislike for Dostoevskii’s works. McLean implies irresponsibility on Nabokov’s part for his failure, or even outright refusal, to disclose to his students the achievements of Russian literary scholarship on

Dostoevskii of preceding decades (266). As criticism and instruction, this treatment of Dostoevskii does little credit to Nabokov and is indicative of unrestrained bias.

It is tempting to view Fyodor as a *direct* embodiment of the author's values regarding art and literature, especially because many of the character's meditations throughout the novel could be seen to anticipate the convictions expressed in Nabokov's critical writings as an English-language author. Fyodor himself shares his creator's low opinion of Dostoevskii: "Obratnoe prevrashchenie Bedlam v Vifleem,—vot vam Dostoevskii" (67).<sup>18</sup> The introductory essay "Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers", states MacLean, "articulates convictions about authorial freedom that Nabokov had held at least since his work on the Chernyshevsky chapter in *The Gift*" (1995: 259). Nabokov's assertion that repressive forces upon Russian authors came from both Tsarist censors as well as Russian progressives (*Russian Literature* 3-10) is anticipated by Fyodor's own preoccupations with artistic freedom even as an émigré writer.

Another attribute of Nabokov that Fyodor embodies is, of course, a keen eye for banality. Early in the first chapter of *Dar*, for instance, Fyodor's childhood recollections evoke depictions of the "handsome demons" ("prekrasnye demony" [14]) populating vulgar advertisements. This recollection contains some hints of Nabokov's treatment of the phenomenon later in his career, particularly in the essay "Philistines and Philistinism," which describes advertisements in a markedly similar manner (311-13). Fyodor extends his depiction of these *poshlyi* advertisements in *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo*: "Takie sredstva poznania, kak dialekticheskii materializm, neobyknovenno napominaiut nedobrosovestnye reklamy patentovannykh snadobii,

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<sup>18</sup> "Bedlam turned back into Bethlehem—that's Dostoevski for you" (72).



vrachuiushchikh srazu vse bolezni” (225).<sup>19</sup> The vulgarity of advertisements is attributable to the suggestion that, in Nabokov’s words, “the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser” (“Philistines and Philistinism” 313). Fyodor conflates this philistine materialism with Marxist materialism, for both can be assumed to guarantee a generalized means of realizing human happiness.

In many ways, it would appear that Fyodor is more or less a representative of Nabokov’s ideological persuasions (or lack thereof) and aesthetic values, and so it is worth remaining critical of Nabokov’s claim that “I am not, and never was, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev” (n.pag.), just as it is worth acknowledging the element of literary criticism at work throughout the novel, as many scholars have done (Karlinsky, for instance). For now I will set aside the question of Nabokov’s relationship with the novel’s protagonist and address directly how literary criticism serves as compositional thread in *Dar*.

### 2.2.2 *Dar* as Literary Criticism

Many of the aesthetic values Nabokov outlines in his lectures are treated in *Dar* through Fyodor’s position within the context of Russian literature, as well as through how he responds to the world around him through art. Presently I will address how literary criticism functions as both a literary device and a thematic undercurrent in the novel. Simon Karlinsky offers a succinct structural example of the function literary criticism serves in the composition of *Dar*, as well as in Fyodor’s development of his literary craft. *Dar*, notes Karlinsky, is “a hybrid of fictional and critical genres” (286). Similarly, the designation of subjective or even “creative” criticism corresponds to the notion of a hybrid genre of fictional criticism. One might even argue that

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<sup>19</sup> “Such methods of knowledge as dialectical materialism curiously resemble the unscrupulous advertisements for patent medicines, which cure all illnesses at once” (249).

Nabokov never ceases being an artist, even in his non-fictional works, a view that is advanced by Diment in her comparative study of Nabokov and Strachey, neither of whom believed “that a biographer or a historian should quell his imagination in order to present an objective picture” (290).

As Karlinsky notes, the novel’s evocation of Pushkin and Chernyshevski underscores “the constant conflict within Russian literature between those who regard it as a creative process and those who are interested in it only as a prop for extra literary ends of one sort or another” (287). This conflict in Russian literature, one of Fyodor’s chief preoccupations, is also paralleled in Nabokov’s later lectures, specifically in “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers,” to which I referred previously. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Fyodor’s first imagined exchange with Koncheyev, the novel’s overall subject of Russian literary history, presupposes a readership image through its demands of a thorough knowledge of Russian literature (Karlinsky 287).

*Dar* focuses on nineteenth-century Russian writers, especially Pushkin and Gogol. Pushkin, in particular, is treated as Fyodor’s basic measure of a given author’s aesthetic worth. Ultimately, Pushkin represents the antithesis of Chernyshevski, whom “Nabokov [...] presents as directly responsible for Russia’s cultural wasteland” (Davydov, “Exorcism” 358). The following passage attests to the value of Pushkin’s work in determining the “talent” of a literary critic:

так уже повелось, что мерой для степени чутья, ума и даровитости русского критика служит его отношение к Пушкину. Так будет покуда литературная критика

не отложит вовсе свои социологические, религиозные, философские и прочие пособия, лишь помогающие бездарности уважать самое себя. (231)<sup>20</sup>

However, Nabokov seems to misrepresent Chernyshevski's views on Pushkin to a degree. While Nabokov asserts that Chernyshevski deemed Pushkin's work "rubbish and luxury" ("vzdor i roskosh'" [231]), David Rampton notes that, despite Chernyshevski's preoccupation with the socio-political dimension of the author's work, he still acknowledged Pushkin's genius (74). Rampton also notes that Nabokov's attribution of the designation "vzdor i roskosh'" to Chernyshevski is done through associating him with Pisarev, which ultimately generalizes both progressive authors, whilst denying nuanced but noteworthy differences. As with Nabokov's previously mentioned lecture on Dostoevskii, this misattribution can be considered the result of authorial prejudice, although, as I argue in the next section, it does serve a specific aesthetic purpose.

Monika Greenleaf's study addresses the Pushkinian presence in *Dar*, specifically in terms of its elegiac tone, which constitutes a triple mourning for Russia, Fyodor's (and Nabokov's) father, and the Russian language. This explains the significance of Fyodor's name, taken from Boris' son Fyodor in Pushkin's *Boris Godunov*. It is appropriate that much of the novel's second chapter focuses on Fyodor's attempt at writing a biography of his father as well as on his reading of Pushkin for the purposes of enrichment: "u pushkinskogo chitatelia uvelichivaiutsia legkie v ob"eme" (87).<sup>21</sup> Nabokov's description here implies a strong sense of physicality in Fyodor's readings of Pushkin. These enriching and even life-giving exercises

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<sup>20</sup> "[I]t has long become customary to measure the degree of flair, intelligence and talent of a Russian critic by his attitude to Pushkin. And this is how it will remain until Russian literary criticism discards its sociological, religious, philosophical and other textbooks, which only help mediocrity admire itself" (255).

<sup>21</sup> "[T]he reader of Pushkin has the capacity of his lungs enlarged" (97).

prove useful for Fyodor's writing of *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo*. The physicality implied in Pushkin's art is an antithesis to Nikolai Chernyshevski, whom Fyodor ironically portrays as a materialist with more of an appreciation for the abstractions he applies to the physical world than for the physical world itself (219-20).

The second chapter ends with Fyodor's change of residence, a distance which he estimates is "from Pushkin Avenue to Gogol Street" (145). Such a move signals Fyodor's advancement in terms of a movement through Russian literary history, conceived in semiotic spatial terms. Hyde notes that the novel's third chapter is then characterized by a style that is "more comic and devious, more fanciful and 'metaphysical,' yet at the same time more grotesquely involved in the minutiae of Berlin life" (25). It is also quite appropriate that in this chapter Fyodor, having abandoned an elegiac biography of his father, first conceives the idea for his satirical biography of Chernyshevski, which itself is Gogolian in style. Just as Fyodor's readings of Pushkin serve as an aesthetic signpost, so his readings of Gogol serve as exercises in detecting, mocking and even aestheticizing *poshlost'*. In "*The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevskii*," Davydov notes that "Gogol's art of the grotesque sets a stylistic example of how *poshlost'* should be mocked" (359). "Fyodor's vivisection of Chernyshevskii," says Davydov, "is executed with a Gogolian scalpel" (368).

Therefore, literary criticism in *Dar*, in addition to serving as an underlying theme, also figures in the work's actual composition. Just as Nabokov's stipulation that a growing literary critic should "learn to distinguish banality" (*Strong Opinions* 66) can be considered in terms of the composition of *Dar*, its protagonist's very awareness of *poshlost'*, by extension, factors into the structure of the text and the manipulation of its devices.

### 2.2.3 Author and Protagonist

In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov affirms the distinction between his recollections and their appropriation for the purposes of fiction. “I have often noticed,” states Nabokov, “that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of past, it would pine away in the artificial world I had so abruptly placed it,” and “its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be safe from the intrusion of the artist” (64). This passage implies some distance between himself and his protagonists, especially those protagonists who are writers. Nabokov’s opinions of his relationship to Fyodor differ in nuance. Whereas in his foreword to the English-language translation of *Dar* he denies any similarity outright, he later notes that the fourth chapter of the novel was written by an author “sort of like me, but I myself wouldn’t have written it that way” (Field 30).

It is difficult to distinguish clearly between Fyodor and his creator, since he bears the greatest similarity to Nabokov out of any of his protagonists. It should be no surprise that there is hardly a scholarly consensus on this matter. There are, firstly, many critics who hardly distinguish at all between Fyodor’s and Nabokov’s aesthetics and, in fact, consider both personalities to be one and the same. Based on how many aspects of Nabokov’s actual literary criticism are reflected in *Dar*, this position is certainly understandable. Perhaps the most direct expression of this viewpoint is the notion of a character “equivalent,” which Fowler defines as “a character who could have created Nabokov’s fiction [...] Nabokov’s equivalent is not allowed to have any failings at all, or only a highly specialized one, like nympholepsy” (14). There is little doubt as to Nabokov’s affection for Fyodor as a character, as indicated by how he endows the

young author with such artistic gifts. However, I disagree with Fowler's assertion that the novel's narrative design is subordinated to Fyodor's interests in such an uncompromising manner. While this might be true to a certain extent, there are plenty of instances that testify to Fyodor's shortcomings as an artist, as well as instances where the narrative mode is strategically manipulated at his expense as a character. I commented in the previous chapter on Connolly's observation of the novel's shifting narrative modes. I argued that these shifts might be interpreted as a means of demoting Fyodor to the position of character rather than author.

Rampton and Karlinsky express views similar to Fowler's, although without the concept of a character "equivalent." Rampton asserts that "Nabokov makes no sustained attempt at maintaining a fixed distance between himself and his creation, and we need not pretend he has done" (70), while Karlinsky states that Fyodor's views on literature are "clearly Nabokov's" (286). I maintain a critical stance towards the notion that readers "can *safely* assume that Fyodor speaks for his creator" (Rampton 70) [emphasis added], since safe assumptions are often incompatible with Nabokov's fiction in general. As I have noted previously with reference to Connolly's conceptualization of the authorial self to first-person and the character self to third-person perspective, the extent to which Fyodor speaks for Nabokov varies throughout the novel. Galya Diment's study treats one aspect of this variable connection between Nabokov and Fyodor:

How much this biographical treatment of Chernyshevsky is Nabokov's own is a somewhat open question. The majority of critics prefer not to draw any distinction here between Fyodor and his creator, reasoning that whereas Nabokov may make some attempts to distance himself from his autobiographical protagonist in the rest of the novel,

he clearly makes Fyodor a mouthpiece of his own views when it comes to Russian literature. (286)

I emphasize Diment's assertion that the biographical component of *Dar* is ambiguous. In the realm of fiction, especially Nabokov's fiction, I concur with Diment's further assertion that "a critic may be well-served to steer away from an absolutely unequivocal equation of Fyodor and Nabokov" (288).

Monika Greenleaf's study presents a further critical development on Nabokov's relationship to his protagonist, which I believe better accounts for its variable, dynamic nature throughout the novel. As Greenleaf argues, Nabokov "creates a labile, deniable relationship with his fictional protagonist, without renouncing their common lyrical substratum" (141). The "labile" aspect of Nabokov's relationship with Fyodor is worth emphasizing given the previously mentioned narrative shifts, which assume a third-person point of view when the author wishes to distance himself from Fyodor during more artistically incriminating moments.<sup>22</sup> I believe that Greenleaf's position better captures the position I propose in interpreting Nabokov's text or texts as a model of his consciousness. Such a nuanced conception of the author's relationship to his protagonist avoids the overstatements of assuming any unequivocal affinity between them. While similar views are held by other authors on the subject (Diment, for instance), I believe Greenleaf's assertion is strengthened by its overall scope.

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<sup>22</sup> In Section 1.2, I discussed the automatizing effect that Fyodor's cultural prejudices have upon his upon his artistic perception. If one recalls Glynn's assertion that Nabokov's aesthetics can be considered with respect to Shklovsky's conception of art as a means of rendering the world more perceptible through "estrangement" (42), then Fyodor's artistic sensibilities are cast in doubt when he resorts to familiar cultural stereotypes. Therefore, it is quite convenient that the novel's second chapter resumes a first-person viewpoint just as Fyodor begins to describe his father.

I thus assert that while Nabokov's protagonist shares his own aesthetic values and his "gift," part of which is the young author's keen eye for discerning banality, their relationship is nonetheless tenuous. The "deniability" of Nabokov's similarity to his protagonist is essential for my own purposes in this study, because it accords with Lotman's view of art as a secondary – not primary – modelling system. Though Lotman sees art as a model of reality, the reflection between art and reality is never complete, or else the object reflected in art would have no artistic or aesthetic value at all (Shukman 46). This is no less true of an author's reflection of himself in an artistic text.

Of course, the question remains as to what function deniability serves when the similarity in aesthetic sensibilities between Nabokov and Godunov-Cherdyntsev seems quite obvious. Previously I referred to Rampton's observations about Nabokov's or, as I argue, Fyodor's misrepresentation of Chernyshevski. I also noted how such misattributions parallel some rather prejudiced convictions expressed in Nabokov's lectures. Rampton, for instance, asserts that Nabokov "doesn't help his cause by using colourful details to disguise judicious omissions" (75). Dolinin asserts that this position is a misguided one that ignores the broader context of the novel. Rampton's argument, albeit insightful in its own right, relies on the assumption that the biography of Chernyshevski implies Nabokov's rather than Fyodor's authorial voice. I believe that this position underscores some of the problems inherent in directly equating Nabokov's authorial voice with Fyodor's, especially since, despite its polemical nature, *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* is hardly intended to be a factually accurate work. In fact, some of Rampton's objections are mirrored by Professor Anuchin's review of Fyodor's work. Anuchin concludes that Fyodor mocks his reader as well as Chernyshevski and takes his citation of the fictitious



authority Strannolyubski as evidence that the author holds the reader in contempt. It is no surprise that Rampton does not refer to this detail.

Fyodor's misrepresentation of Nikolai Chernyshevski serves an essential purpose. It is a "misreading" that is intentional and strategic, as it serves to channel the anxieties he experiences at the novel's beginning into his creative endeavour. His own fears of a reader doing violence to his art are turned into the creative energy for the aesthetic mockery of a utilitarian, materialist author, whom he hardly deems worthy of an honest reader. Fyodor's derision for Chernyshevski undercuts any caution against misrepresenting an artist of whom he thinks very little. Fyodor's interpretive creativity of Nikolai Chernyshevski emphasizes his authorial persona. The natural result of Fyodor's intentional "corruption" is a distortion, or the creation of "noise" in the transmission of information about Chernyshevski's life, works and artistic values. Lotman describes such a process as follows:

Усложнение семиотической структуры получателя текста и превращение его в *личность* является условием замены простой передачи сообщения творческим процессом. Однако степень распределения творческой активности между различными элементами коммуникационной цепи может в этом случае существенно варьироваться. Полярными здесь будут случаи сосредоточения активности в звене автор—текст и соответственно понижения ее на уровне получателя, и предельная активизация творческих возможностей адресата при ослаблении этих функций в других звеньях цепи. (*Semiosfera* 208)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "For a simple message transmission to become a creative process a condition is that the semiotic structure of the text-receiver be more complex and be a *personality*. But the degree of creative activity may vary greatly between the various elements of the communicative chain. At the one pole is the case when activity is concentrated on the link

In Fyodor's case, the end result of this "maximal activation" ("predel'naia aktivizatsiia") of Fyodor's creative capacities is *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* itself. Rampton's criticism of "Nabokov's" oversights ignores the fact that Fyodor is a reflection and, indeed, a distortion of Nabokov as an artistic personality. Rampton also mistakenly attributes the biography's "mistakes" to scholarly oversight rather than artistic agency. Fyodor's biases can be considered an example of "noise" as far as a work of non-fiction goes. However, a peculiar feature of art, asserts Lotman, is its capacity for transforming noise into information (*Struktura* 99). It is therefore appropriate that Koncheyev is the only reviewer sympathetic to Fyodor's biography as a work of art (277).

The fictional Professor Anuchin, on the other hand, fails to see *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* as a work of art, as Koncheyev does. His view of the work is perhaps best reflected in his accusation that Fyodor mocks his readers as well as his hero and that his authorial voice is both "everywhere and nowhere" ("vsiudu i nigde" [276]). Anuchin's comments need not apply to the reader who has learned to read creatively. The disorienting effects of Fyodor's narrative, elucidated by this autoreview, bear some noteworthy parallels to Foster's discussion of *Nikolai Gogol*, particularly with respect to how Nabokov defines (or does not define) *poshlost'*. According to Foster, Nabokov's elliptical account of *poshlost'*, which characterizes the book as a whole, is designed "to frustrate some of our standard expectations for literary criticism, leaving a gap for creative collaboration from readers" (223). Whether this lack of orientation is troubling or liberating depends on the creative faculties of the readers, "who by definition will be capable of understanding Nabokov only once they have succeeded in becoming artistic" (223). Fyodor's

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between author and text and the receiver's activity is correspondingly lessened; and at the other pole is the case when the creative potentialities of the addressee are maximally activated and those along other links in the chain are weakened" (Shukman 69).

creative reading of Chernyshevski implies an encouragement to the readers of *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* as well as those of *Dar* as a whole.

Moreover, that Fyodor's first work is still a rather immature effort establishes further distance between Fyodor and Nabokov himself. It should also be emphasized that Nabokov, in assuming Fyodor's character, is assuming the role of a writer who, despite the promises of his talent, is presumably still less developed than himself. Many of the perceived flaws of Fyodor's work, suggested by his second imagined meeting with Koncheyev, attest to Nabokov's awareness of an imperfect but essential work in Fyodor's artistic growth.

Aestheticized *poshlost'* coincides with aestheticized scholarship. To evaluate Fyodor's exercise in satire by strict scholarly standards denies the work its aesthetic efficacy and ignores the creation of Chernyshevski as a character outright. While in a literary critic and instructor, the liberties Fyodor takes with his subject are glaring defects, in art they assume a vastly different aspect. I reiterate that Nabokov himself does not fully tame his creative capacities for scholarly or pedagogical purposes. While Fyodor's reading of Chernyshevski is factually dishonest, it is true to his values as an artist. This coincides with Lotman's assertion that in weakening the explicitly communicative function of the text (in this case, the works of Nikolai Chernyshevski), artistic information is increased (*Semiosfera* 208). Since artistic language tends towards unpredictability rather than effective and easy communication, it is characteristically entropic rather than redundant. Since Fyodor is, after all, a reader as well as a writer, his "corruption" of Chernyshevski's works constitutes an act of creative authority.

### 2.3 The Readership Image in *Dar*: Contempt versus Affection

The “deniability” of Nabokov’s relationship to his protagonist allows the researcher to treat Fyodor as a plurality of different character attributes. It is clear from *Dar* that Fyodor is an artist whose relationship with his readers develops throughout the novel. There are two opposing scholarly views regarding Nabokov’s position towards his readers: one that treats it as relationship of affection and the other that assumes an air of contempt. Ellen Pifer’s study addresses many aspects of Nabokov’s fiction that readers and scholars alike often find disturbing, even to the point where contempt for the reader might be discerned. Many of these impressions are bound to the keen “self-awareness” of Nabokov’s fiction, a qualification which applies to *Dar* perhaps more than any of Nabokov’s other novels: “The author alerts his readers to the arbitrary nature of the fiction; and, thinking of our own lives and their mysterious origin, we naturally feel discomfited by such awareness” (Pifer 55). Similarly, William Carroll asserts that “a Nabokovian character’s self-consciousness resembles, though in a distorted manner, our own self-consciousness as readers” (Carroll 203). Since an artistic text models an artist’s conception of reality, how this model *reflects* reality implies a certain degree of distortion. Pifer concludes her paper as follows: “The author’s self-conscious attitude toward the worlds of his invention must not be taken as a sign of disdain for his readers or of his loathing for humanity. Self-consciousness is, quite the contrary, a sign of Nabokov’s essential regard for both” (61). Since *poshlost*’ is often used by Nabokov’s narrators as a device that implies distance or contempt (see section 1.4), it is tempting to assume that the device can just as easily apply to Nabokov’s readers as well. However, Nabokov’s fiction entails an awareness of itself as art, an awareness which emphasizes the boundary between art and reality. How the author acknowledges the artificiality and arbitrariness of the work of fiction, in most cases, confines

Nabokov's contempt to the fictional realm. For Fyodor, this orientation towards one's readership corresponds to the dichotomy of the reader as either a real person or as an abstraction of the artist.

Fyodor's self-reflective re-readings of his poetry, which involve hypothetical addressees, pose some ontological questions regarding the very position of readers and the author's relation to them. In one instance, Fyodor ponders his inclination to "bribe" or "win over" (*podkupat'*) his reader: "V tselom riade *podkupaiushchikh* iskrennost'iu...net, vzdor, kogo *podkupaesh*? Kto etot *prodazhnyi* chitatel'?" (13) [emphasis added]. How this passage differs somewhat in the English translation is worth consideration: "In a whole set of poems, *disarming* by their sincerity...no, that's nonsense—Why must one '*disarm*' the reader? *Is he dangerous*?" (11) [emphasis added]. The English and Russian versions differ from each other in two fundamental respects. Firstly, the actual content of the passage differs semantically from the Russian to English. The words *podkupat'*—*prodazhnyi* ("to bribe—"bribeable" or "corrupt") are rendered as "disarm" and "dangerous" in the English text. Secondly, the manner of Fyodor's speculation is consequently modified with this translation. Whereas in the Russian text, Fyodor asks, "Whom does one bribe?" and "Who is this corrupt reader?," in the English text, he questions the necessity of disarming the reader and whether or not he or she should be viewed as threatening. While the latter poses questions as to the perceived threat of the reader, the former poses the question of the existence of readers so easily "bribed" or "won over." This seems to imply the question: *is there such a reader?*

This issue emphasizes two opposing tendencies at work in Nabokov's fiction and they are explicitly confronted by Fyodor in *Dar* and employed elsewhere in Nabokov's later fiction. On

the one hand, the reader in Nabokov's fiction can be viewed as a figure that must be subdued and subjugated to the author's and/or narrator's will while, on the other, the reader is afforded a greater autonomy from the author's whims and is invited to see beyond the illusory constraints of the text. A common thread in scholarship on *Lolita*, for instance, is that of the seductive narrator who works to manoeuvre the reader into a position of condoning Humbert's depravity.

Durantaye's comment (13), for instance, echoes the English passage to which I refer above:

"*Lolita* sketches and shadows a criminal who presents himself in *disarmingly* human guise"

[emphasis added]. This is corroborated in Nabokov's lecture "Good Readers and Good Writers" in which he states, "A good writer combines these three—storyteller, teacher, enchanter—but it is the enchanter in him that predominates and makes him a major writer" (*Literature* 5). In other words, the interpretation of an artistic text depends on whether one reads *with* or *against* the author or narrator. It is worth noting that Nabokov himself emphasized identification with the author of a given work (i.e., the "consciousness" that conceived it) rather than the characters within it (*Russian Literature* 11).

A certain sense of a readership image is implied early on in *Dar*, particularly when Fyodor imagines the readers of the fifty-one copies of his collection of poetry that have been sold. That Fyodor pictures them in rather vague terms implies that they possess no identity to him other than their status as readers. Otherwise, their similarity suggests conformity to a "readership image" Fyodor possesses: "On predstavliai sebe nekotoroie pomeshchenie, polnoe etikh liudei (vrode sobraniia aktsionerov,—"chitatelei Godunova-Cherdyntseva"), i vse oni byli pokhozhi drug na druga, s vdumchivymi glazami i belo knizhechkoi v laskovykh rukakh" (139-

40).<sup>24</sup> Zina is the only reader of this group who is actually individuated in Fyodor's consciousness. The essential thesis of Blackwell's monograph is that Zina Mertz is Fyodor's "first and ideal reader" and that her reception serves a collaborative role which ultimately gives shape to his work. Blackwell argues further that Zina's role is analogous to the role between author and reader: a lovingly collaborative relationship (100-101).

Contrarily, Eric Naiman argues that the strength of Zina's character and overall control over the narrative is dubious. Additionally, many interactions between Fyodor and Zina are characterized by a marked distance. Even as their romantic relationship advances, both characters are distanced through the third-person narrative perspective through which their interactions are conveyed. At this point in the novel Zina's and Fyodor's interactions are depicted from the third person. Conversely, Fyodor's subjective experiences as a reader are typically depicted in the first person such as, for instance, when reading his own work in print or critiquing Yasha Chernyshevski's poetry.

There is, nonetheless, some basis for considering Zina beyond her status as a character and Fyodor's love interest. In fact, during one of Fyodor's earliest encounters with Zina, she asks him to sign a "pleasantly worn" ("priatno potrepannyi, priatno razmiagchennyi dvukhletnim pol'zovaniem" [162]) copy of his poetry collection. The worn condition of the volume attests to one attribute of the good reader as stipulated by Nabokov in "Good Readers and Good Writers": that of *rereading* (3). This lends some weight to Blackwell's position that Zina personifies Fyodor's, as well as Nabokov's, conception of an honest and patient reader. Blackwell also offers a convincing assessment of the impact of the émigré theorist Iulii Aikhenval'd who, he

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<sup>24</sup> "He imagined a roomful of these people (like a meeting of stockholders—'readers of Godunov-Cherdyntsev') and they were all alike, with thoughtful eyes and a small white volume in their affectionate hands" (155).

argues, is “the most clearly identifiable formative influence upon [Nabokov]” (25), especially in terms of the latter’s conception of *poshlost’* and the philosophy of reading (27, 30).

Naiman, however, views as problematic the notion that Zina is emblematic of Nabokov’s affection for his readers. According to Naiman, Blackwell overstates the degree to which Zina represents the autonomy of the reader and attempts to “depict Nabokov’s relation to his readers in reassuring terms.” Naiman also places Blackwell’s assessment of *Dar* within the broader context of Nabokov scholarship that reflects a “desire to idealize the relationship between author and reader and to neutralize its troubling complexities” (162). Naiman’s argument is critical of Zina’s influence over the text and, by extension, the degree to which readers should feel empowered, if at all (164). However, I believe this depends a great deal on the actual reader and how one confronts the challenges of Nabokov’s fiction.

Nabokov emphasizes the importance of being able to discern banality (*Strong Opinions* 66). However, in the realm of his fiction, just as in his criticism, this is often banality on in the author’s or the narrator’s terms. Nyegaard’s comments on the narrative function of *poshlost’* are particularly useful here: “If one reads attentively and refuses to wield the ‘deadly label,’ or at least applies it with care, one may manage to see through the narrator’s manipulations” (361-62). “Donning the mask of a highly unreliable and immoral narrator,” continues Nyegaard, “*Nabokov challenges the reader to see through different layers of reality*” (363) [emphasis added]. Nyegaard’s observation reflects a prevalent theme in Nabokov’s world view. “You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality;” states Nabokov, “but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable” (*Strong Opinions* 11). The “reality” that is presented in Nabokov’s



and, indeed, any author's fiction hardly differs in this quality. While there is little basis for comparison between Fyodor and Humbert, it is nonetheless clear that for both characters the presentation of his reality is influenced by his own imperatives. Fyodor's insistence on his differences from Yasha Chernyshevski, for instance, can be viewed as a means of downplaying his own shortcomings. In this respect, Yasha's lack of talent distracts the reader from Fyodor as a gifted, but nonetheless immature and, at times, insecure writer. Nyegaard's argument therefore emphasizes criticality as an additional criterion for evaluating "gifted" reading.

The importance of critical reading is closely tied to whether the reader shares the author's or narrator's aesthetic or ideological persuasions. Areas of disagreement between ideological codes thus become more meaningful than coincidence. Nabokov was adamant, not necessarily about denying subjectivity but, rather, "tempering" it (*Literature* 5). Nabokov himself conceded that "Everything that is worthwhile is to some extent subjective" (4).

Similarly, Umberto Eco notes that refraining from bias is a difficult, if not impossible, ideal to attain. This often depends on how uncritically a reader takes a given author's pronouncements. In his discussion of ideological overcoding, Eco notes that "the reader approaches a text from a personal ideological perspective, *even when he is not aware of this*, even when his ideological bias is only a highly simplified system of axiological oppositions" (22) [emphasis added]. As a device that pertains to the author's ideological perspective, *poshlost'* functions as a vehicle for Fyodor's uncompromising aesthetic values as well as his indifference to didactic or socio-political interests. In *Dar*, Fyodor anticipates through his projection of Koncheyev the possibility, and even the inevitability, that his reader's own values are unlikely to coincide with his own. Nyegaard's above suggestion that Nabokov invites readers to "see

through different layers of reality” can be held to apply to the author, the protagonist or both. As Lotman asserts, a greater difference between codes of addresser and addressee generates a greater value of information. In *Kul'tura i vzryv*, for instance, Lotman argues that the complete intersection of linguistic space of addresser and addressee renders communication redundant, whereas no coincidence at all renders it impossible:

обмен информацией в пределах пересекающейся части смыслового пространства страдает все тем же пороком тривиальности. Ценность диалога оказывается связанной не с той пересекающейся частью, а передачей информации между непересекающимися частями. (16)<sup>25</sup>

Bearing in mind Eco's and Lotman's comments, I believe that arriving at an informed assessment of *Dar* lies not necessarily in identifying with the artist as Nabokov suggests (*Russian Literature* 11), but in recognizing the inherent value of a reader's inability to identify with the consciousness of the artist or at least certain aspects of it. In *Dar* Fyodor is preoccupied with the likely incompatibility of his own consciousness with those of his readers. His development as an artist is, in part, related to his ability to reconcile himself with this predicament.

What testifies most strongly to Fyodor's awareness of this is his final imagined exchange with Koncheyev towards the end of the novel. While the exchange demonstrates a bond between the two writers similar to the exchange in the first chapter, Koncheyev, or at least his projection, is careful to warn Fyodor about overestimating their affinities:

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<sup>25</sup> “The exchange of information within the intersecting parts of the semantic space suffers from the self-same flaw of triviality. It appears that the value of dialogue is linked not to the intersecting part, but to the transfer of information between non-intersecting parts” (Clark 5).

На всякий случай я хочу вас предупредить, [...] чтобы вы не обольщались насчет нашего сходства: мы с вами во многом различны, у меня другие вкусы, другие навыки, вашего Фета я, например, не терплю, а зато люблю автора 'Двойника' и 'Бесов,' которую вы склонны третировать...Мне не нравится в вас многое,— петербургский стиль, галльская закваска, ваше неовольтеррианство и слабость к Флоберу,—и меня просто оскорбляет ваша, простите, похабное-спортивная нагота. (308-09).<sup>26</sup>

This scene further attests to a conception of *poshlost*' that models subjective aesthetic values (see e.g., Foster 223; Rampton 95-6; Davydov "Poshlost" 631"). This exchange evokes Fyodor's preoccupation with and even his internalized anxiety before a discriminating reader. However, Fyodor's admiration for Koncheyev only makes his criticisms of some of his aesthetic tastes (his "weakness for Flaubert" or his contempt for Dostoevskii, for instance) part of this affection. Fyodor's perception of his readers is thus not concentrated within the character of Zina Mertz. Instead, like many aspects of Fyodor's personality, Fyodor's consciousness as both reader and writer are dispersed throughout the novel. Zina, like Koncheyev, can be speculated to be a projection of Fyodor's and, to a greater extent, Nabokov's artistic consciousness.

While, according to Naiman, Nabokov professes a profound affection for his creation, he appeals to readers through necessity rather than a desire for intimacy (177). Once again the author does not, and indeed cannot, dominate the creation of artistic space (see Andrews 112-13) if he wishes to ensure the work's longevity, energy and preservation from aesthetic inertia,

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<sup>26</sup> "At all events I warn you [...] not to flatter yourself as regards our similarity: you and I differ in many things, I have different tastes, different habits; your Fet, for instance, I can't stand, and on the other hand I am an ardent admirer of the author of *The Double* and *The Possessed* whom you are disposed to slight.... There is much about you I don't like—your St. Petersburg style, your Gallic taint, your neo-Voltaireanism and weakness for Flaubert—and I find, forgive me, your obscene sporty nudity simply offensive" (341).

exhaustion and, of course, *poshlost*. “Thus,” states Eco, “the form of the work of art gains its aesthetic validity precisely in proportion to the number of different perspectives from which it can be viewed and understood” (49). In this respect, Lotman emphasizes that misunderstanding of a text is just as important as understanding (*Semiosfera* 220). Rowe’s take on Nabokov’s sexual symbolism (see *Strong Opinions* 304-07 for Nabokov’s response) and even Nafisi’s *Reading “Lolita” in Tehran* inadvertently emphasize some key aspects of Nabokov’s stipulations for his readers. Nabokov condemns the arbitrariness of Rowe’s arguments, whereas Eric Naiman criticises Nafisi’s work for identifying with both the character of Dolores Haze and the author’s socio-political angle on the novel (135-36).

What Blackwell takes as honest reading—i.e., “to grant the text and author their own full existence within the literary event”—is only attainable to a certain degree. “That precondition,” continues Blackwell, “enables the eternal embrace of two individuals established by Aikhenval’d and Nabokov as the ideal” (*Zina’s Paradox* 33). Ultimately, how the text is actualized in the reader’s consciousness depends on the codes, values and presuppositions utilized in the process. However, some of Aikhenval’d’s values pertaining to the reader’s honesty can be held to apply to an *honest* amount of effort in arriving at an interpretation rather than superficial assessment. “I work hard, I work long, on a body of works until it grants me complete possession and pleasure,” says Nabokov. “If the reader has to work hard in his turn—so much the better” (1973: 115). Likewise, in his essay “Pisatel’ i chitatel’,” Aikhenval’d states as follows: “khudozhestvennoe

slovo, bezdonnoe, nikogda ne mozhet byt' gotovo i koncheno; skazannoe pisatelem, ono prodolzhaetsia u chitatelia" (93).<sup>27</sup>

Aikhenval'd's statements are reflected throughout *Dar* with respect to Fyodor's preoccupation with the image of his readers. Upon completing his first rereading, for instance, Fyodor imagines a reader impression antithetical to Aikhenval'd's ideal model: "Vneshnii vid knigi priaten" (27). Zina's well worn (i.e., frequently reread) copy is, by contrast, very pleasing to Fyodor. As an open text, the seemingly infinite interpretive possibilities provided by *Dar* can be regarded as an acknowledged condition by any perceptive and patient reader. Thus, the interpretation of an open text is never complete; Eco terms this condition "ideal insomnia" (9). Likewise, Lotman argues that the interpretation of an artistic text is, like any form of knowledge, a constant unveiling:

Путь к познанию—всегда приближенному—многообразия художественного текста идет не через лирические разговоры о неповторимости, а через изучение неповторимости как функции определенных повторяемостей, индивидуального как функции закономерного. (*Struktura* 101)<sup>28</sup>

Lotman goes on to discuss the apprehension of a literary text's innovative quality, in similar terms, to any form of knowing. On this point, Shukman elaborates that "Uniqueness then is always there and not there, an illusion to be dissected into laws and systems, which ultimately are themselves unattainable and not wholly knowable. *Knowledge is a process, not an*

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<sup>27</sup> "[A]rtistic expression is bottomless and can never be finished; what is said by the author continues with the reader" (93).

<sup>28</sup> "The path leading to knowledge—always and approximate knowledge—of the diversity of an artistic text does not proceed by way of lyrical conversations of the meaning of uniqueness, but by studying uniqueness as a function of certain repetition, by studying what is individual as a function of what occurs regularly" (Lenhoff and Vroon 77).

*attainment, the discovery of one system but the preliminary to the discovery of another*” (131) [emphasis added]. Thus the reality of the text, as actualized by the reader, is never absolute. By extension, Nabokov’s emphasis on the importance of *rereading* corresponds to his conception of reality as “an infinite succession of steps” (*Strong Opinions* 11).

According to Nabokov, the labours of the author should ideally be repaid by the reader in turn. The life of the artistic text depends on creative readers to derive renewed perceptions of the text. Knowledge of a work of art is thus an infinite progression rather than an absolute attainment. In his appreciation of “originality” as an illusory concept, Nabokov emphasizes deceptive artifice as well as on an awareness of the aesthetic experiences and sensibilities of a given text’s audience. What complicates the performance and actualization is the experience one brings to it as well as the temperament with which they receive the work. A theme that is developed throughout *Dar*, and elsewhere in Nabokov’s fiction is the appreciation of detail. The inability of certain characters (e.g., Nikolai Chernyshevski, Shirin, Shchyogolev, Busch) to recognize banality is frequently equated to an overall failure of vision. This can be extended to how readers approach a given work.

As an open text, *Dar* is “productively ambiguous” in its composition (Eco), which is to say that its devices are employed to an optimally entropic effect, ensuring a vast plurality of interpretive possibilities. This is due, in part, to the author’s steadfast denial of works of socio-political intent or, in Nabokov’s words, the “literature of ideas.” The novel itself is ensured interpretive vitality and aesthetic validity by virtue of its indeterminacy. Yet Nabokov himself, as well as Fyodor, testify to Lotman’s notion of deceptive novelty: “Vsiakoe novatorskoe

proizvedenie stroitsia iz traditsionnogo materiala” (*Struktura* 32).<sup>29</sup> In *Dar*, Nabokov acknowledges the wealth of material from the Russian literary tradition whilst appropriating and encoding it in a novel and aesthetically effective manner. Commenting on Aikhenval’d’s influence, Blackwell observes that “Nabokov’s most cherished creation was the myth of his own originality” (25). Lotman conceptualizes the appearance of how originality is achieved as follows: “chem bol’she zakonomernostei peresekaetsia v dannoi strukturnoi tochke, tem individual’nee on kazhetsia” (*Struktura* 101).<sup>30</sup>

Nabokov is renowned as a strikingly original prose stylist, and it is certainly appropriate that Nabokov’s aesthetics are commonly associated with the Formalist emphasis on the function of art as means of renewing perception (Shklovsky 4-6). Glynn’s study expertly traces this facet of Formalist influence on Nabokov’s work (37-38), but also acknowledges Nabokov’s derision for the Russian Futurist movement with which the Formalists were closely affiliated (35-36). Nabokov’s aesthetics are not based exclusively on novelty, as was the case with the Formalists (Erlich, *Formalism* 149-50). I believe that Nabokov’s position on what Erlich calls the “cult of novelty” (“In Perspective” 221) is best summed up in the words of Sebastian Knight’s half-brother: “super modern things have a queer knack of dating much faster than others” (*Sebastian Knight* 28). Erlich suggests that the ultra-revolutionary tenor of the Formalist movement led its proponents to neglect the fact that recognition, not mere novelty, was a vital component of the aesthetic experience (*Formalism* 282).

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<sup>29</sup> “Every innovative work is constructed of traditional material” (Lenhoff and Vroon 22).

<sup>30</sup> “The greater the number of regular series which intersect at given structural point, the more individual the text seems” (Lenhoff and Vroon 77).

Lotman's early formulation of a theory of aesthetics considered art as the establishment of similarity as well as difference (*Lektsii* 18-19). Lotman also conceived of the terms the aesthetics of identity (*estetika tozhdestva*) and the aesthetics of contrast (*estetika protivopostavleniia*). Lotman uses these terms describe the lens through which a given text's aesthetic worth is assessed. To reiterate, the aesthetics of identity describes works that tend towards either generalization or fulfilling strict genre conventions. The aesthetics of contrast applies to those works that tend towards greater complexity or defying existing genre conventions (*Lektsii* 173-74). Nabokov, at times, seems to fulfill conventional genres or forms, but exploits them for innovative purposes. In *Dar*, this operates at more than one level. One way this operates is the acknowledgement of a cliché that is then followed by an ironic reversal, such as when Fyodor acknowledges the conventionality of his anti-German sentiments and in other instances when he catches himself resorting to cliché hackneyed devices.

In a broader sense, while the novel might share some features of a given genre, such as the *Künstlerroman* for instance, this itself is a deception. Dolinin comments on this aspect of the novel:

*The Gift* is most certainly an exemplary "anti-novel," for it not only synthesizes several incompatible genre models but audaciously transgresses their most sacred laws and plays havoc with readers' genre expectations. Even if a resemblance between *The Gift* and this or that genre model may at times become striking, one should be aware that this is almost certainly a trap, a deception, a false lead, a cunning parodic play. (Dolinin 140)

Nabokov therefore employs conventionality as another use of the literary "false scent." On the perceived repetitiveness of Nabokov's work, Rowe comments that, "Nabokov has



characteristically transformed apparent weakness into apparent strength” (Rowe 112). Nabokov’s work therefore exploits illusory conventionality as a means of cultivating an original style. Whereas some Russian artists might have viewed revolutionary fervour or bold pronouncements of modernity as a remedy for *poshlost’*, one might argue that Nabokov’s works represent novelty as a function of repetition.

As *Dar* reaches its end, Fyodor’s stylistic idiom has been calibrated by his biographical exercise. He is, at this point, prepared to confront his next endeavour with confidence in his deceptive faculties. Fyodor learns of the many coincidental near encounters between himself and Zina throughout the novel which eventually led up to his decision to live with the Shchyogolevs, a decision which is influenced by fate’s “last desperate manoeuvre” (364) when Fyodor notices a ball dress draped over a chair. It ultimately transpires that the dress did not belong to Zina:

“Только это было не мое платье, а моей кузины Раисы,— причем она очень милая, но совершенная морда,—*кажется, она мне его оставила, чтобы что-то снять или пришить.*”

“Тогда это совсем остроумно. Какая находчивость! *Все самое очаровательное в природе и искусстве основано на обмане.* Вот видишь—начала с ухарь купеческого размаха, а кончила тончайшим штрихом. Разве это не линия для замечательного романа? Какая тема! Но обстроить, завесить, окружить чащей жизни—моей жизни, с моими писательскими страстями, аботами.” (330) [emphasis added]<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Only that wasn’t my dress, it was my cousin Raissa’s—she’s very nice but a perfect fright—I think she left it for me to take something off or sew something on.”

This passage testifies to what is perhaps Fyodor's most profound artistic revelation. Zina's statement attests to Fyodor's realization of his own creative capacities through the artistic appropriation of material left to him with which can alter as he sees fit to create something stylistically new or "take something off or sew something on," so to speak. It is Fyodor's deception before a sequence of fateful contrivances that serves as one of his most profound developments in terms of his position towards his future readers; the gifted author masterfully deceives while the reader attempts to see beyond the deception, a relationship which pertains to Fyodor, first as a reader and later as a writer. The relationship between author and reader (or text and readership) is thus a complex game of competing subjectivities.

#### 2.4 Conclusion

In his art, Fyodor, like Nabokov, considers himself answerable only to himself. If readers must work to impose their own interpretation on the text in competition with the author's "readership image" implied by the textual artefact, it is still a victory for the author if, as Eco says, this further aesthetically validates the work. It is ultimately the fear of mediocrity that propels the artist ever forward, which lends further weight to Nabokov's qualification of *poshlost'* as "beautifully timeless" (*Nikolai Gogol* 64), an appropriated version of banality or mediocrity that is aestheticized to the point of innocuousness.

I should once again emphasize the considerable overlap between the categories I address in each respective chapter. Fyodor's preoccupation with his hypothetical readers is, no doubt, autocommunicative in nature as well. On the internal level, this autocommunicative act

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'Then it was even more ingenious. What resourcefulness! *The most enchanting things in in nature and art are based on deception*. Look, you see—it began with a reckless impetuosity and ended with the finest of finishing touches. Now isn't that the plot for remarkable novel? What a theme! But it must be built up, curtained, surrounded by dense life—my professional passions and cares'" (364). [emphasis added]

facilitates the immediate restructuring of the semiotic self. Fyodor's concern for his audience can be viewed as a macrocosmic level of the autocommunicative act since culture and thought mutually influence one another. I will now move on to an explicit examination of the autocommunicative process in *Dar*.

## Chapter Three: Autocommunication

### 3.1 Introduction

In previous sections I touched on the concept of autocommunication with respect to Fyodor's maturation as an artist. I also addressed the division of Fyodor's personality into the attributes of author and character, as noted by Connolly (*Patterns* 197). The concept of autocommunication (*avtokommunikatsiia*) treats the individual self as both addresser and addressee, in contradistinction to what can be designated *heterocommunication*, wherein addresser and addressee are separate and alternate in these roles as their dialogue progresses. Whereas in a heterocommunicative act information is transmitted through space, in an autocommunicative act, information is transmitted through time. The ultimate result, states Lotman, is qualitative change in the information transmitted to the self in time and a subsequent semiotic reorganization of the self (*Semiosfera* 165).

I have divided my analysis into two sections. I will first address the autocommunicative act in terms of the protagonist. I have established already that Nabokov's authorial persona is dispersed throughout the narrative and thus assumes a flexible and deniable relationship with his fictional protagonist (see Section 2.2.3). To this end, I have argued that the shifts between author and protagonist are of strategic importance and that it is misleading to directly associate Nabokov with Fyodor. I do, however, hold that those traits of Fyodor that correspond to Nabokov do serve as a basis for autocriticism by an agent that logically cannot be Fyodor himself within the context of the narrative. I will then discuss the concept of autocommunication as it pertains to the author before moving onto a concluding summary of this section.

## 3.2 Character Autocommunication

There are two principal aspects of autocommunication that I wish to address: self-description or self-modelling (avtomodel'), which here I view in connection with self-awareness concerning issues of originality, and how this self-awareness leads to the reorganization of the protagonist's consciousness through the course of the novel. I will divide this discussion into smaller subsections, each of which will address specific aspects of the autocommunicative process as it pertains to Fyodor. I will begin with a discussion of self-modeling, which will then be followed by a discussion of the essentially autocommunicative process of inspiration. I will then conclude this section with a discussion of the temporal dimension of autocommunication and how *Dar* demonstrates an orientation towards the protagonist's future self.

### 3.2.1 Self-awareness, Self-description and Self-criticism

Semiotic restructuring plays a vital, and perhaps even the most significant, role in Fyodor's advancement as an artist and, as I argue, it is achieved by means of a heterocommunicative process. Connolly conceptualizes one sense of the self-other dynamic in Nabokov's fiction as "the relationship of one character to some part of his identity that he may view as other" (*Patterns* 2). I assert that arriving at the designation of certain aspects of a character's self as "other" necessarily involves an act of intrapersonal communication. Although in his study of *Lolita* and Dostoevskii's "Krotkaia" (*Nabokov's Dialogue* 20), Connolly briefly alludes to the concept of autocommunication (citing Isenberg 52), neither Connolly nor Isenberg elaborate at any length on the concept of autocommunication. Isenberg merely designates the narrative of Dostoevskii's "Krotkaia" as "an autocommunication" without any further comment, let alone any reference to Lotman's understanding of it within the context of the creative process.

Perhaps the novel's earliest instance of autocommunication in terms of self-modelling occurs with Fyodor's rereading of his recently published poetry collection. In these instances, the autocommunicative act assumes an additional dimension by virtue of its subject matter: Fyodor's childhood memories. The poems themselves already deal with reflections across time. Fyodor's creative reminiscence constitutes one instance of an artistic exercise: a semiotic reorganization of his creative faculties via his aestheticized childhood recollections. This autocommunicative act assumes further depth with Fyodor's subsequent reflections on the very effectiveness of his poeticized memories. The autocommunicative aspect of Fyodor's reflexive rereading of his own work is not merely implicit with respect to Lotman's conception of the term. Lotman, in fact, provides this as a very specific example of autocommunication:

Сообщение самому себе уже известной информации прежде всего имеет место во всех случаях, когда при этом повышается ранг сообщения. Так, когда молодой поэт читает свое стихотворение напечатанным, сообщение текстуально остается тем же, что и известный ему рукописный текст. Однако, будучи переведено в новую систему графических знаков, обладающих другой степенью авторитетности в данной культуре, оно получает некоторую дополнительную значимость.

*(Semiosfera 164)*<sup>32</sup>

Fyodor's rereading and anticipation of how hypothetical readers will receive his work is an autocommunicative act performed on a creation which is itself the product of the very same

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<sup>32</sup> "Communication to oneself of already known information takes place in all cases when the rank of the message is raised. When, for instance, a young poet reads his poem in print the message remains textually the same as it was in his manuscript text. Yet being translated into a new system of graphic signs which have another degree of authority in the given culture it acquires supplementary value" (Shukman 21).

process. Part of what forms the “supplementary value” (dopolnitel’naia znachimost’) in this case in the actual format in which Fyodor’s work will appear in contrast to the original manuscripts.

Fyodor performs the same ritual when his work appears in Vasilev’s *Gazeta*. In this instance, the effect is heightened through his juxtaposition with other authors who are printed in the paper, none of whom he bothers reading. Fyodor’s work assumes greater salience within the context of the paper’s political content. In another one of Nabokov’s ironic reversals, the individual aspect of Fyodor’s rereading is emphasized in relation to the remainder of the paper’s content: “Stikhi zhe, buduchi meloch’iu, voobshche prokhodili pochti bez kontroliia, prosachivaias’ tam, gde zaderzhalas’ by drian’ bol’shego vesa i ob”ema” (58).<sup>33</sup> This contextual shift amplifies the effect of the message. Lotman augments his discussion of autocommunication by referring to Vygotsky’s notion of “internal speech” (vnutrenniaia rech’). Vygotsky notes that an essential feature of inner speech is the absence of vocalization (287-92). In *Dar*, this process is depicted in terms of sensations that lack any verbal aspect; it is here that a hallmark of Nabokov’s prose comes into effect—synesthetic imagery. Different reading evokes corresponding sensations, described by varying hues and tastes:

он почти физически чувствовал, как при каждом таком перевоплощении у него меняется цвет глаз, и цвет заглазный, и вкус во рту,—и чем ему самому больше нравился дежурный шедевр, тем полнее и слаще ему удавалось перечесть его за других. (58)<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> “And poems, since they were mere trifles, passed almost entirely without control, trickling through openings where rubbish of greater weight and volume would have got stuck” (62).

<sup>34</sup> “with each of these different incarnations he would almost physically feel a change in the color of his eyes, and also in the taste in his mouth, and the more he liked the chef-d’oeuvre du jour, the more perfectly and succulently he could read it through the eyes of others” (63).

The fact that such sensations are evoked by an image of readers whose “opinion he considered important” (63) attests to the readership image as an aspect of his intrapersonal communication act. His act of reading from varying perspectives combines his egoistic or internal speech with the speculated readership codes of a various “talented readers.” Fyodor’s experiment also attests to Lotman’s assertion that a text accords different artistic information to perceivers according to their knowledge, understanding or values (*Struktura* 34-35). Fyodor’s artistic consciousness is not merely constituted by his awareness of the world around him or even his aloofness from others, but by his intimate understanding of the aesthetic experience.

Lotman’s concept of the “self-model” is useful here. Lotman defines the self-model as a means of self-description at the cultural level: “Avtomodel’—moshchnoe sredstvo ‘doregulirovki’ kul’tury, pridaiashchee ei sistemnoe edinstvo i vo mnogom opredeliiushchee ee kachestva kak informatsionnogo rezervuara” (*Semiosfera* 420). In this way, the process of self-description and self-regulation is one other aspect of self-development or reorganization. As Torop states, “Self-description is a process of autocommunication, and its result can be a self-modelling that fixes the dominants, the principles of unification, and the generative language of self-description” (392). In *Dar*, while it is important to note the vital temporal dimension of the autocommunicative process in terms of how Fyodor perceives himself as an artist through time, the immediate awareness must itself be taken into account as well.

I addressed in the previous chapter Fyodor’s preoccupation with how his future readers might interpret his poems and whether such readers would do justice to the impressions he seeks to convey. However, Fyodor is also preoccupied by the adequacy of his skills to effectively capture these impressions. In one instance, he critiques what he now perceives as ambiguous and



inaccurate word choices: “Pochemu mne ne ochen’ po nutru epitet ‘trepeshchushchuiu?’” (11);<sup>35</sup> “‘Vatnaia shapka’—buduchi k tomu zhe i dvusmyslitsei, sovsem ne vyrazhaet togo, chto trebovalos” (18).<sup>36</sup> In his immaturity and vulnerability, Fyodor fears that his words are verbally “going off the mark” (“promakhivaia’s slovesno” [18]). His early self-assessments, though suggestive of greater ambitions, are thus quite critical. Throughout the novel, his cognizance of falling into hackneyed forms or contaminating his recollections with a sort of creative dishonesty remains a consistent motif.

The vital effect of the autocommunicative process is the addresser—addressee’s restructuring of his or her inner essence: “on vnutrennee perestraivaet svoiu sushchnost” (*Semiosfera* 165). Lotman also notes that the process of autocommunication often involves interference from external supplementary codes (socio-cultural for instance) as well as external stimuli; he provides the examples of Tiutchev’s poem “Son na more” as well as three excerpts from Chapter 8 of Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin*. In *Dar* it is clear from the tram episode that Fyodor’s mental indictment is hardly a self-contained process as it entails supplementary, socially-mediated codes (*Semiosfera* 165).

I noted that this episode presents the protagonist in the third person. In light of Connolly’s observations on this author-character divide, *Dar* as a whole can be viewed as a text in which the autocommunicative function serves as a fundamental compositional mechanism. If Fyodor is viewed as both a participant in and creator of the novel, or a novel very much like *Dar* itself, the third-person estrangement of Fyodor’s character from his first person self can be

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<sup>35</sup> “Why doesn’t the epithet ‘quivering’ quite satisfy me?” (10).

<sup>36</sup> “The ‘cottonwool cap’ is not only ambiguous but does not even begin to express what I meant” (18).

viewed, to an extent, as a communicative act through time where Fyodor presents himself in the third person “on” whenever he wishes to distance artistically immature versions of himself from the mature authorial “ia.” Alternatively, it might also be viewed as a rebuke that denies Fyodor narrative authority. The tram scene, to which I referred in section 1.2, is perhaps the most strategic use of this shift in narrative perspective.

Fyodor’s most intense bout of anti-German thoughts is first accompanied by self-rebuke for the conventionality of his invective: “Russkoe ubezhdenie, chto v malom kolichestve nemets poshl, a v bol’shom—poshl nesterpimo, bylo, on znal eto, ubezhdeniem, nedostoinym khudozhnika” (73).<sup>37</sup> The pre-established code is accompanied first by the external stimuli (being bumped by the commuter) which incites his fury:

и тем самым обратил его раздражение в какое-то ясное бешенство, так что, взглянув пристально на сидящего, читая его черты, он мгновенно сосредоточил на нем всю свою грешную ненависть (к жалкой, бедной, вымирающей нации) и отчетливо знал, за что ненавидит его: за этот низкий лоб, за эти бледные глаза; за фольмильх и экстраштарк,—подразумевающие законное существование разбавленного и поддельного;...за любовь к частоколу, ряду, заурядности; за культ конторы; за то, что если прислушаться, что у него говорится внутри (или к любому разговору на улице), неизбежно услышишь цифры, деньги; за дубовый юмор и

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<sup>37</sup> “The Russian conviction that the German is in small numbers vulgar and in large numbers—unbearably vulgar was, he knew, a conviction unworthy of an artist” (81).

пипифаксовый смех; за толщину задов у обоего пола,—даже если в остальной своей части субъект и не толст. (73-74)<sup>38</sup>

The contrast between both of Fyodor's impressions can also be felt in their punctuation. The first passage is presented as an extremely long sentence, divided by commas and semicolons, which only emphasizes the furious energy of his thought. It is interrupted as the commuter coughs and abruptly ends Fyodor's indictment. The narrative then assumes a more relaxed pace with the beginning of the next paragraph. The later stimuli (noticing the copy of the Russian newspaper and the "Russian intonation" of the man's cough) result in a radical change in Fyodor's thought processes: "'Vot eto slavno,'—podumal Fedor Konstantinovich, edva ne ulybnuvshis' ot voskhishchenia. Kak umna, iziashchno lukava i v sushchnosti dobra zhizn'!" (74).<sup>39</sup> Fyodor's failure of discernment works at two levels. On the one hand, he is unable to see beyond conventional cultural prejudices and, on the other, he mistakes the nationality of the commuter. Moreover, his delight in and recognition of the deception suggests his realization of its contrived nature.

The convictions expressed in this passage are extended towards the novel's end in a letter Fyodor writes to his mother. Once again, he expresses his contempt for present German culture, even though he realizes once again that he is implicated in the very banality he condemns: "ia by

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<sup>38</sup> "[A]nd this trivial thing turned his irritation into a kind of pure fury, so that, staring fixedly at the sitter, reading his features, he instantly concentrated on him all his sinful hatred (for this poor, pitiful, expiring nation) and knew precisely why he hated him: for that low forehead, for those pale eyes; for *Vollmilch* and *Extrastark*, implying the lawful existence of the diluted and the artificial [...] for a love of fences, rows, mediocrity; for the cult of the office; for the fact that if you listen to his inner voice (or to any conversation on the street) you will inevitably hear figures, money; for the lavatory humour and crude laughter; for the fatness of the backsides of both sexes, even if the rest of the subject is not fat" (81).

<sup>39</sup> "That's wonderful, thought Fyodor, almost smiling with delight. How clever, how gracefully sly and how essentially good life is!" (82).

mog eshche dolgo,—i zaniatno, chto polveka tomu nazad liuboi russkii myslitel' s chemodanom sovershenno to zhe samoe strochil—obvinenie nastol'ko ochevidnoe, chto stanovit'sia dazhe ploskim” (317).<sup>40</sup> Despite the obvious first-person perspective necessary for this epistolary fragment, the narrative leading up to its quotation presents Fyodor's writing of the letter from a third-person narrative perspective (315-16).

Elsewhere in the novel, Fyodor's art is accompanied by tremendous self-consciousness in his skills as an artist, a constant fear of mediocrity in his works. His projection of Koncheyev, for instance, predicts the “banal and soul-rending tale” (75) of one of Fyodor's anecdotes. This is not to say that Fyodor completely lacks confidence in his abilities. In fact, they arguably serve as a means of artistic stimulation: “Schitat' sebia bezdarnost'iu vriad li bylo by luchshe, chem verit' v svoiu genial'nost': Fedor Konstantinovich somnevalsia v pervom i dopuskal vtoroe, a glavnoe sililsia ne poddavat'sia besovskomu unyniu belogo litsa” (139).<sup>41</sup>

It is also clear that Fyodor's striving to attain true literary greatness is not an individual affair but also informed by a broader cultural and historical context. For Fyodor, it is useless to concede that words have been exhausted and that poetry is futile. “Chasto povtoriaemye poetami zhaloby na to, chto, akh, slov net, slova blednyi tlen, slova nikak ne mogut vyrazit' nashikh kakikh-to tam chuvstv (...), emu kazalis' stol' zhe bessmyslennymi, kak stepennoe ubezhdenie stareishego v gornoi derevushke zhitelia, chto von na tu goru nikoga nikto ne vzbiralsia i ne

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<sup>40</sup> “I could go on much longer—and it is amazing that fifty years ago every Russian thinker with a suitcase used to scribble exactly the same—an accusation so obvious as to have become banal” (350).

<sup>41</sup> “To consider himself a mediocrity was hardly any better than believing he was a genius: Fyodor doubted the first and conceded the second, but more important, strove not to surrender to the fiendish despair of a blank sheet” (154).

vzberetsia” (139).<sup>42</sup> This lends further weight to the broader cultural dimension of the autocommunicative process. He realizes that even a depiction of a woman stepping off a bus, moving up from the feet, is hackneyed: “my znaem, chto eto v konets zataskano usiliem tysiachi pishushchikh muzhchin” (147).<sup>43</sup> The description’s conventionality is acknowledged before being subjected to another ironic reversal: “i obmanuli: lichiko bylo gnusnoe” (147). Fyodor’s indirect evocation of Pushkin also attests to the cultural medium in which individual consciousness is immersed: “Raz byli veshchi, kotorye emu khotelos’ vyskazat’ tak zhe estestvenno i bezuderzhno, kak legkie khotiat rasshirit’sia, znachit dolzhny byli naitis’ godnye dlia dykhaniia slova” (139).<sup>44</sup> This calls to mind Fyodor’s earlier readings of Pushkin as a means of aesthetic training or figurative “breathing exercises” as implied in Fyodor’s assertion that the reader of Pushkin has the capacity of their lungs expanded (87).

It is clear that Fyodor finds no other artistic undertaking as troublesome as the writing of his father’s biography, which he aborts towards the end of the second chapter. “Da, ia znaiu, chto tak ne sleduet pisat’,—na etikh vozglasakh vglub’ ne uedesh’,—no moe pero eshche ne privyklo sledovat’ ochertaniiam ego obraza, mne samomu protivny eti vspomogatel’nye zavitki” (99).<sup>45</sup> It appears that Fyodor’s memory of Konstantin Kirillovich is almost too precious to aestheticize, or

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<sup>42</sup> “The oft repeated complaints that of poets that, alas, no words are available, that words are pale corpses, that words are incapable of expressing our thingummy-bob feelings [...] seemed to him just as senseless as the staid conviction of the eldest inhabitant of a mountain hamlet that yonder mountain has never been climbed by anyone and never will be” (154).

<sup>43</sup> “[W]e know of course that this been worn threadbare by the efforts of a thousand male writers.” (163)

<sup>44</sup> “Since there were things he wanted to express just as naturally and unrestrainedly as the lungs want to expand hence words suitable for breathing ought to exist” (154).

<sup>45</sup> “Yes, I know that is not the way to write—these exclamations won’t take me very deep—but my pen is not yet accustomed to following the outlines of his image, and I myself abominate these accessory curlicues” (109).

it is at least too valuable to risk making a false step or vulgarizing (oposhliat') his recollections in the same manner as his early compositional exercises. Monika Greenleaf suggests that "It is as if the son's efforts to recollect every last word and gesture of his father have led finally to a memory-lapse, a dead-end where memory shades imperceptibly into imagination, substitution and art" (147). The following passage, in addition to disclosing to Fyodor's mother his torment in undertaking the work, also covers several key aspects of the autocommunicative processes at work in *Dar*. For this reason, I believe it is worth quoting at length:

Из тьмы черновиков длинных выписок, неразборчивых набросков на разнородных листках, карандашных заметок, разбредшихся по полям каких-то других моих писаний, из полувычеркнутых фраз, недоконченных слов и непредусмотрительно сокращенных, уже теперь забытых, названий, в полном своем виде прячущихся от меня среди бумаг,—из хрупкой статики невозобновимых сведений, местами уже разрушенных слишком скорым движением мысли, в свою очередь расплывшейся в пустоте,—из всего этого мне теперь нужно сделать стройную, ясную книгу.

Временами я чувствую, что где-то она уже написана мной, что вот она скрывается тут, в чернильных дебрях, что ее только нужно высвободить по частям из мрака, и части сложатся сами...—но что мне в том проку,—когда этот труд освобождения кажется мне теперь таким тяжелым и сложным,—так страшно, что загрязню его красным словцом, замаю переноской,—что уже сомневаюсь, будет ли книга написана на самом деле. (125)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> "Out of swarms of drafts, long manuscript extracts from books, indecipherable jottings on miscellaneous sheets of paper, penciled marks straggling over the margins of other writings of mine; out of half-crossed-out sentences, unfinished words, and improvidently abbreviated, already forgotten names, hiding from full view among my papers;

This passage is an apt representation of Fyodor's thought processes and their autocommunicative dimensions. Fyodor's consciousness is presented as disorganized and even chaotic, as indicated by the state of his manuscript notes. Lotman, however, also considers such notes an example of the autocommunicative process. In the case of diary jottings, for instance, the purpose is not necessarily to remember certain information but, rather, to elucidate the writer's state of mind (*Semiosfera* 164). Fyodor's greatest issue is his fear that he will poorly fulfill the task he sets out to do, which is best indicated by his fear that he will "dirty it with a flashy phrase" ("zagriazni[t'] ego krasnym slovtsom"). It is implied here that Fyodor fears vulgarizing his father's memory even more so than his own poetry. Finally, Fyodor still perceives the biography as a potentiality despite its state of disorder, which implies that he still perceives the finished work in some form. I will return to the temporal aspect of the autocommunicative process in the final part of this section (section 3.2.3). For now I will turn to an analysis of the autocommunicative aspect of Lotman's conception of tension and inspiration.

### 3.2.2 Autocommunication and Inspiration

In in Chapter Five of *Kul'tura i vzryv*, Lotman defines inspiration (vdokhnovenie) as the "conjunction of the incompatible under the influence of a certain creative tension" (*Culture and Explosion* 20). Lotman offers two opposing conceptions of inspiration. The first is harmonious with scientific knowledge rather than incompatible with it; it can be conceived as knowledge in

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out of the fragile staticism of irredeemable information, already destroyed in places by a too swift movement of thought, which in turn dissolved into nothingness; out of all this I must now make a lucid, orderly book. At times I feel that somewhere it has already been written by me, that it is hiding here, hiding in this inky jungle, that I have only to free it part by part from the darkness and the parts will fall together of themselves....But what is the use of that to me when I am so much afraid that I might dirty it with a flashy phrase, or wear it out in the course of transfer onto paper, that I already doubt whether the book will be written at all" (138).

its highest state, in which the incomprehensible becomes obvious. The second conception is antithetical to scientific knowledge; it is characterized by the element of tension pulling humanity away from the sphere of logic and into the realm of “unpredictable creativity” (“nepredskazuemoe tvorchestvo” [27]). Lotman links Pushkin with the logical model while associating Blok with the model which is characterized by tension between two realms.

Lotman’s two opposing conceptions of artistic inspiration bear not only upon the insecurities Fyodor faces in cultivating himself as an artist but also on Nabokov’s own anxieties as an artist, which are addressed in several instances in Nabokov scholarship. Lotman uses Blok’s poem “Khudozhnik” as an example of creative inspiration that draws the artist as well as the perceiver into a realm of “unpredictable creativity” (*Culture and Explosion* 20). Conversely, the works of Pushkin epitomize the lucid, scientific precision that Nabokov so highly values. Any discussion of Fyodor’s and Nabokov’s preoccupation with originality in *Dar* cannot ignore the spectres of Blok and Pushkin that haunt the novel. Fyodor’s self-consciousness over the precision of his own work in capturing his recollections coincides with his constant need to rationalize his poetry, both of which become a sort of hindrance to his creativity. This is quite evident from Fyodor’s gradual move away from recollection towards fictionalization:

The “degree of fictionalization” in his prose writings continually rises as the tangibility of their objects diminishes (the beloved father, the historical figure Chernyshevski, the invented sage Delalande), and paradoxically should reach its planned climax in the planned ‘autobiography’—a synthetic fictional transfiguration of all the realities in which its author have ever existed. (Dolinin 148)



Hence, another aspect of Fyodor's growth as an artist is moving away from his need to preserve dead recollections and instead cultivate his skill for the "deformation" of history and reality within the textual medium.

Bethea associates this antithesis with the Dionysian spirit of music: Blok's music "cannot be appropriated by Nabokov on his own terms. He was, for his generation, the Nietzschean spirit of music, a spirit which is not articulate ('lucid') in a cognitive way and which resists, as indeed Romantic music does, the categories of irony and dialogue" (377). Nabokov's admitted inability to appreciate music offers further insight into his relationship to Blok's poetry: "I have no ear for music, a shortcoming I deplore bitterly [...] I am perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature, especially in matters of structure, but what can I do if ear and brain refuse to cooperate?" (*Strong Opinions* 25). It is Blok's characteristic *lack of lucidity* that Fyodor and Nabokov find challenging and even disturbing. It is Fyodor's recognition of this anxiety in himself (through his projection of Koncheyev) that underlies Koncheyev's refusal to discuss or rationalize his poetry. Whilst the autocommunicative act in Fyodor involves the establishment of a sense of order to his thoughts, clarity to his artistic vision, Koncheyev (as Fyodor projects him) renounces any attempt at rationalizing his poetry or probing its precise meaning.

However, Fyodor's and Nabokov's perceived shortcomings as artists, lead to the further autocommunicative act of self-parody or, in this sense, a further aestheticization of the very *poshlost'* the artist fears. As Struve notes, "Nabokov [...] is masterful in his 'imitative facility' ('pereimchivost') and in his ability to don different masks and manners (Fet, Maikov, Pushkin, Bunin, Balmont, Gumilev, etc.), but none of this is really *his*, and for that reason he can on

occasion descend into tastelessness (the ‘*poshlost*’ the master himself feared in later work)” (qtd. in Bethea 375). Similarly, Fyodor’s realization of the mediocrity of his poetry is instrumental in his decision to concentrate on his prose works. In addition to serving as the basis for future novels, the author’s disappointment and frustration with his own attempts are themselves subject to aestheticization, as demonstrated by his recollections in *Speak, Memory*. “It did not occur to me then,” writes Nabokov, “that far from being a veil, those poor words were so opaque that, in fact, they formed a wall in which all one could distinguish were the well-worn bits of the major and minor poets I imitated” (160). However, as Bethea notes, Nabokov’s failure as a poet only signals his maturity as an author: “Nabokov’s retrospective wit seems so bright and buoyant in this instance precisely because the failed poet *already knows* that he will become a master fiction writer” (375-76).

It is tension that is instrumental to the evolution of Fyodor’s artistic development. Fyodor comes to terms with this dilemma through his reflexive re-readings of his poetry and later on in his failed attempt to write his father’s biography. His imagined exchanges with Koncheyev provide an excellent example of how this underlying tension informs his creative cognition. The concluding line of the novel’s first chapter clearly foregrounds the effect Fyodor’s projection of Koncheyev has upon him: “Komu kakoe delo, chto my rasstalis’ na pervom zhe uglu i chto ia vedu sam s soboi vymyshlennyi dialog po samouchitel’iu vdokhnovenia” (69).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, during their second exchange towards the end of the fifth chapter, Koncheyev’s projection further elucidates the autocommunicative aspect of Fyodor’s inspiration:

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<sup>47</sup> “Whose business is it that actually we parted at the very first corner, and that I have been reciting a fictitious dialogue with myself as supplied by a self-teaching handbook of literary inspiration?” (76).

“Когда я был мал, я перед сном говорил длинную и мало понятную молитву, которой меня научила покойная мать,—набожная и очень несчастная женщина, она-то, конечно, сказала бы, что эти две вещи несовместимы, но ведь и то правда, что счастье не идет в чернецы. Эту молитву я помнил и повторял долго, почти до юности, но однажды я вник в ее смысл, понял все ее слова,—и как только понял, сразу забыл, словно нарушил какие-то невозстановимые чары. Мне кажется, что то же самое произойдет с моими стихами,—что если я начну о них осмысленно думать, то мгновенно потеряю способность их сочинять. *Вы-то, я знаю, давно развратили свою поэзию словами и смыслом,—и вряд ли будете продолжать ею заниматься. Слишком богаты, слишком жадны. Муза прелестна бедностью.*”

(308)<sup>48</sup> [emphasis added]

Through this second exchange with Koncheyev, Fyodor diagnoses the fundamental difficulty he faces at the novel’s beginning (see italicized passage): his frustrated attempts to rationalize his poetry and account for the interpretive talents of his future readers. Koncheyev’s outright refusal to discuss his poetry with Fyodor emphasizes the tension between immediate insight and the rejection of any logic in one’s creative experience. By considering both of these conceptions of inspiration within a single artistic consciousness, one seemingly divided into two characters, the

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<sup>48</sup> “When I was small, before sleep I used to say a long and obscure prayer which my dead mother—a pious and very unhappy woman—had taught me (she, of course, would have said that these two things are incompatible, but even so it’s true that happiness doesn’t take the veil). I remembered this prayer and kept saying it for years, almost until adolescence, but one day I probed its sense, understood all the words—and as soon as I understood I immediately forgot it, as if I had broken an unrestorable spell. It seems to me that the same thing might happen to my poems—that if I try to rationalize them I shall instantly lose my ability to write them. You, I know, corrupted your poetry long ago with words and meaning—and you will hardly continue writing verse now. You are too rich, too greedy. The Muse’s charm lies in her poverty” (340-41).

novel bears out the ideas put forward by Lotman regarding the polarity of the positions elucidated by Pushkin and Blok:

Полярная противопоставленность высказываний Пушкина и Блока лишь обнажает их глубинное единство: в обоих случаях речь идет о моменте непредсказуемого взрыва, который превращает несовместимое в адекватное, непереводимое в переводимое. (*Semiosfera* 29)<sup>49</sup>

While Fyodor's projection of himself and of Koncheyev likewise express the antithetical views of which Lotman speaks, their unity underscores both tendencies at work in the young author's thinking. His attempts to render the untranslatable translatable are epitomized by his successful aestheticization of Chernyshevski's brand of materialism, which he initially scoffs at as a topic of any value to an artist of talent.

It is clear that in many ways Fyodor strives towards this ultimate state of knowledge in his creative rendering, in minute detail, of the sensations of his childhood recollections. His frustrations are further intensified with his attempts to write his father's biography, in which his attempts to make "the incomprehensible obvious" are complicated by the tension between precision and invention. The tension between scientific observation and artistic invention, between Pushkin and Blok, is manifested in the tension between Fyodor and Koncheyev as two aspects of one artistic consciousness. At the same time, their unity is just as prominent.

Perhaps what distinguishes autocommunication or intrapersonal communication the most from normal interpersonal communication is its temporal aspect. According to Jakobson, "While

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<sup>49</sup> "The polarity of Pushkin's and Blok's messages serves only to highlight their deep unity: in both cases the moment of unpredictable explosion renders the incompatible adequate and the untranslatable translatable" (Clark 23).

interpersonal communication bridges space, intrapersonal communication proves to be the chief vehicle for bridging time” (Jakobson, “Communication” 98). Lotman concurs with this position (*Semiosfera* 164). In *Dar* it is not only the protagonist’s self-awareness that facilitates his artistic growth but, naturally, this awareness across time where the future author functions as a separate perceiver. Fyodor’s self-awareness through time and his appreciation of its vitality is a constant preoccupation in the novel: the autocommunicative process is essential to the novel’s movement as a *Künstlerroman*.

From the novel’s very beginning, Fyodor’s preoccupation with his future artistic endeavours is established: “Vot tak by po starinke nachat’ kogda-nibud’ tolstuiu shtuku,”—podumalos’ mel’kom s bespechnoi ironiei—sovershenno, vprochem, izlishneiu, potomu chto kto-to vnutri nego, za nego, pomimo nego, vse eto uzhe prinial, zapisal i pripriatal” (6).<sup>50</sup> Even from the novel’s outset, it implies an awareness of the future composition of the novel itself or, a novel resembling *Dar*. The additional suggestion of a consciousness that operates within him but independently to record the scene for later use suggests a more mature future version of Fyodor’s self. His obsession with his future readers is arguably paralleled by his own future as an artist.

Koncheyev’s presence in Fyodor’s consciousness has perhaps the most profound influence on Fyodor’s future ambitions. During their first imaginary exchange, Koncheyev suggests that Fyodor’s poems are models for his future novels: “Itak, ia chital sbornik vashikh ochen; zamechatel’nykh stikhov. Sobstvenno, eto tol’ko modeli vashikh zhe budushchikh

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<sup>50</sup> “Some day, he thought, I must use such a scene to start a good, thick old-fashioned novel. The fleeting thought was touched with a careless irony; an irony, however, that was quite unnecessary, because somebody within him, on his behalf, independently from him, had absorbed this, recorded it and filed it away” (4).

romanov” (65).<sup>51</sup> This conviction comes full circle by the novel’s end during Fyodor’s second exchange with Koncheyev, when Fyodor concludes what he already had known in a latent form: “Nastoiashchemu pisatel’iu dolzhno naplevat’ na vsekh chitatelei, krome odnogo: budushchego,—kotoryi v svoiu ochered’, lish’ otrazhenie avtora vo vremeni” (307).<sup>52</sup> *Speak, Memory* reflects Koncheyev’s statement to an extent. As an example of self-evaluation, Nabokov recalls the mediocrity he perceived in his first attempt at writing verse: “It was a phenomenon of orientation rather than art, thus comparable to stripes of paint on a roadside rock or to a pillared heap of stones marking a mountain trail” (156). What is perhaps more telling is his cursory evaluation of other émigré writers. One of the the only authors Nabokov discusses at length is Sirin (Nabokov’s penname as an émigré writer). This digression is available only in the English-language text:

But the author that interested me most was naturally Sirin [...] Among the young writers produced in exile he turned out to be the only major one. Beginning with the appearance of his first novel in 1925 and throughout the next fifteen years, until he vanished as strangely as he had come, his work kept provoking an acute and rather morbid interest on the part of critics [...] Sirin’s admirers made much, perhaps too much, of his unusual style, brilliant precision, functional imagery and that sort of thing. Russian readers [...] were impressed by the mirror-like angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences and by the fact that the real life of his books flowed in his figures of speech. (214-15)

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<sup>51</sup> “By the way, I’ve read your very remarkable collection of poems. Actually, of course, they are but the models of your future novels” (71).

<sup>52</sup> “The real writer should ignore all readers but one, that of the future, who in turn is merely the author reflected in time” (340).

Nabokov's self-evaluation and self-appraisal underscores Koncheyev's assertion. Here, the author's reflection on his past self identifies his stylistic features, strengths and shortcomings. His first two novels, which he refuses to name, he regards as "to *my* taste mediocre" (215) [emphasis added], an assertion that evaluates his earliest efforts whilst implying himself as "other." Nabokov's self-reflection affirms that one's skill and worth as an artist can only be apprehended after sufficient meditation.

### 3.3 Authorial Autocommunication

Previously, I established my position on the extent to which Fyodor can be taken as a stand-in for Nabokov, an issue which has a considerable bearing on the present discussion. I have argued that to equate Fyodor directly with Nabokov is to deny a vital dialogic aspect of the novel as a model of the author's consciousness, an aspect of the novel which is, by extension, autocommunicative. Here I will extend my discussion of *Dar* as an autocommunicative act beyond the level of character. I will therefore assess how *Dar* serves as an autocommunicative means for facilitating Nabokov's artistic maturation.

Rather than taking Fyodor as Nabokov's aesthetic or polemical surrogate, I emphasize that the novel as a whole, and indeed the entirety of Nabokov's fiction, presents the author's consciousness that is diffused throughout his work. Sergei Davydov, like Diment and Greenleaf, emphasizes the importance of maintaining this distance between author and protagonist. Davydov examines Nabokov's texts using the analogy of nesting-dolls (a *matreshka*) as a means of conceptualizing their intertextual nature: "V 'matreshkakh' vneshnii avtorskii tekst vstupal v dialogicheskoe otnoshenie s vnutrennim tekstom geroia. Svoim dialogicheskim metodom

‘matreshki’ Nabokova napominaiut sokratovskii dialog” (*“Teksty-matreški”* 184).<sup>53</sup> If we take Davydov’s conception of *Dar* as a dialogical novel in conjunction with Lotman’s conception of the artistic text as a means of modelling the author’s consciousness, then the relationship between Fyodor and his creator can be viewed as a means of modelling the autocommunicative process as an aspect of the device. Fyodor’s maturation gestures towards a future greatness, the movement towards artistic autonomy.

While Fyodor does possess, as Fowler would suggest (14-15), a privileged position in the novel, the superior consciousness of a separate narrator nonetheless presides over him. While it permits Fyodor a great deal of autonomy as a protagonist, this is a privilege that is revoked when the “true” narrator steps in to assume control. Since the text can be understood as a model of a given conscious perception of the world, the dialogue between competing narrative perspectives is another aspect of the autocommunicative process itself. Connolly similarly implies dialogic or autocommunicative properties through his suggestion that Nabokov’s characters often treat certain aspects of their personalities as “others” (*Patterns* 2).

The most explicit means by which Nabokov participates in the autocommunicative process of the novel are through the employment of reviews of Fyodor’s *Zhizn’ Chernyshevskogo*. Nabokov is rather thorough in this regard by assuming the perspectives of critics of several different ideological positions. While most of the reviews planted in the novel for the most part attack the author on the grounds of its style, factual inaccuracies or things that the reviewers consider to be exceedingly poor taste and contrived for mere shock value, the

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<sup>53</sup> “In ‘matreshkas’ the external authorial text has entered into a dialogic relationship with the internal text of the hero. The dialogic method of Nabokov’s ‘matreshkas’ calls to mind a Socratic dialogue” (Trans. Aylward).



views they express do themselves serve an autocommunicative function. Nabokov's fictional critiques of *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* serve as a means of stylistic self-modelling or self-description. Through presenting misguided positions that attempt to ascertain Fyodor's disorienting style, Nabokov establishes a self-model by opposition.

The biography's first response comes from Valentin Linyov who criticizes the work's "factual inaccuracies," failing to recognize Fyodor's creative liberties. To a greater extent, Linyov criticizes Fyodor's for writing "in a language having little in common with Russian" (302) and attributing certain maxims to the figures he depicts:

Он любит длинные запутанные фразы, как например: 'Их сортирует (?) судьба в предвидении нужд (!) биографа' или вкладывает в уста действующих лиц торжественные, но не совсем грамотные, сентенции, вроде 'Поэт сам избирает предметы для своих песен, толпа не имеет права управлять его вдохновением.'  
(272)<sup>54</sup>

Mortus' review is especially significant given her mention earlier in the novel.<sup>55</sup> In her review of Koncheyev's collection of poetry *Soobshchenie (Communication)*, Fyodor discerns a sense of "flattering hostility" ("lestnaia vrazhdebnost'") and feels envious that he does not receive such reviews of his own work (152). Linyov, who is also mentioned as one of Koncheyev's reviewers, is dismissed by Fyodor outright, given the critic's muddled analysis and butchering of

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<sup>54</sup> He loves long tangled sentences, as for example" 'Fate sorts (?) them in anticipation (?) of the researcher's needs (?)' ! or else he places solemn but not quite grammatical maxims in the mouths of his characters, like 'The poet himself chooses the subject, the multitude has no right to direct his inspiration" (302).

<sup>55</sup> It is established at this point in the novel that Christopher Mortus is actually the penname of "a woman of middle age, the mother of a family, who in her youth had published excellent poems in the St. Petersburg review *Apollo* and who now lived modestly two steps from the grave of Marie Bashkirtsev, suffering from an incurable eye illness which endowed Mortus' every line with a kind of tragic value" (169).

Koncheyev's verse. It is hardly any surprise then that the only positive review of *Zhizn' Chernyshevskogo* comes from Koncheyev, who is the only critic who actually assesses the biography as a work of art rather than exclusively as a polemical exercise: "Uvy! Za rubezhom vriad li naberetsia i desiatok, liudei, sposobnykh otsenit' ogon' i prelest' etogo skazochno-ostroumnogo sochineniia" (277).<sup>56</sup>

In this instance, it is certainly reasonable to assume a greater level of correspondence between Nabokov and his protagonist. There is little doubt that Fyodor's aesthetic values are very much aligned with Nabokov's here. It is also worth bearing in mind that the critics who attack Fyodor's work serve to model these values in an oppositional manner. Anuchin's accusation, for instance, evokes Nabokov's, as well as Fyodor's, admiration for Flaubert who believed that the author should maintain a God-like presence in his works, thus being "nowhere and everywhere" at once (Frank 241). In addition, that the majority of Fyodor's negative reviews only deal with the audacious act of attacking a leading figure of Russia's liberal intelligentsia reflects Nabokov's own condemnation of the Russian progressives who derided Pushkin for his distance to politics rather than his artistic merits. To illustrate the simultaneous parallels to Nabokov's stance on Pushkin as well as progressive figures, I offer the following passage from *Lectures on Russian Literature*:

The audacity of [Pushkin's] versification was deplored as being an aristocratic adornment; his artistic aloofness was pronounced a social crime; mediocre writers but sound political thinkers dubbed Pushkin a shallow versificator. In the sixties and

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<sup>56</sup> "Alas! Among the emigration one will hardly scrape up a dozen people capable of appreciating the fire and fascination of this fabulously witty composition" (308).

seventies famous critics, the idols of public opinion, called Pushkin a dunce, and emphatically proclaimed that a good pair of boots was far more important than all the Pushkins and Shakespeares in the world. In comparing the exact epithets used by the extreme radicals with those used by the extreme monarchists, one is struck by their awful similarity. (*Russian Literature* 6)

Nabokov's comments bring Fyodor's desire for "bad" reviews into context. The role that autocommunication plays here, particularly self-modeling, is the establishment of stylistic and aesthetic features common throughout much of Nabokov's fiction. While Fowler lists several "constants" in Nabokov's works (13-20), I prefer the more flexible conceptualization of Jakobson's hierarchical model, which employs the Russian Formalist concept of the *dominant*. Jakobson defines the dominant as "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure" ("Dominant" 751). Torop elaborates accordingly on the role the dominant plays in Lotman's conception of self-modeling: "Self-description is a process of autocommunication, and its result can be a self-modelling that fixes the dominants, the principles of unification, and generative language of self-description." (392).

Much of what plays into Nabokov's conception of *poshlost'* diffuses into Fyodor. When autocommunication is conceived of in terms of its self-descriptive function, the term *poshlost'* becomes highly semantically charged in Nabokov's fiction. It is not only aestheticized in Nabokov's conception of the term, but it serves as another means of establishing dominants and specific values in his works. As noted by Davydov ("Poshlost'" 630) and Rampton (95), to learn about *poshlost'* from Nabokov means also learning about many things the author derides. While

Nabokov's relationship to Fyodor is deniable in many respects, their values nonetheless offer a self-model that reifies their affinities perhaps more than that provided in any other of Nabokov's works. However, their contrasts are just as worth noting in this respect since, otherwise, the act of intrapersonal communication would become insipid.

### 3.4 Conclusion

The autocommunicative process is essential to how *Dar* employs models of self-description as a means of self-reorganization of the Fyodor's character, within the text, between separate texts (see Davydov "*Teksty-matreški*" 184-85) and, finally, at the broader cultural level. *Dar* presents an exceptional example of the novel as an autocommunicative act, as it contains many clear points of convergence with Lotman's theories of autocommunication. It is a novel that goes well beyond the genre conventions of the *Künstlerroman*; it is a novel that depicts not only the growth of a young artist, but also precisely how this growth takes place. Both author and protagonist demonstrate their acute awareness of *poshlost'*, its eternal and immortal essence, and also of the knowledge that the creative endeavour is never complete.

Nabokov not only presents a novel that communicates with an audience but also implies an awareness of its own autocommunicative nature on the part of the protagonist as well as the author. Fyodor's ultimate revelation by the end of *Dar* is his realization of the importance of his future authorial self over all other readers. In *Dar*, the notion of *poshlost'* in sphere of autocommunication both defines Fyodor's personality and redefines it. Fyodor and his creator's engagement with the Russian cultural, intellectual and artistic preoccupation with banality parallel their engagement with the Russian literary tradition. This engagement contributes to the individual advancement of creative consciousness. In turn, the artist's work engages with the

broader cultural mechanism. In this respect, says Lotman, culture itself can be treated as one vast example of the autocommunicative process (*Semiosfera* 175).

## Conclusion

### 4.1 Summary

In this thesis, I have examined the many nuances of *poshlost*' in Nabokov's fiction, applying it specifically to an analysis of how the novel *Dar* confronts issues of artistic innovation. While I have provided a cultural context for *poshlost*' in Russian literature and culture, I have explicitly examined its function as a literary device. I emphasize, once again, that I approach the concept of the device as a functional or relational concept that assumes meaning according to the context in which it appears. I have offered a nuanced conception of the device, assessing its compositional role in individuation, character relations, modelling the author's aesthetic and ideological values, and, of course, the advancement of the protagonist towards artistic maturity.

I began by examining the demarcating and individuating function that *poshlost*' serves in the novel. I established first the cultural aspect of the boundary, in which case the cultural or extra-literary implications of *poshlost*' come to bear upon how it functions as a device. I concluded that Fyodor's individual consciousness is shaped through tension between boundaries and his constant recreation and renegotiation of them. I then examined Nabokov's relationship to his readership via the text and how this is modelled through Fyodor's preoccupations with his readers. I established from this discussion that the text is intended as a model of the author's consciousness and not an idealization of the author-reader relationship. I then examined Fyodor's artistic maturation as an autocommunicative process. I establish in this discussion that Fyodor's cognizance of *poshlost*' applies to his artistic self-evaluation. I concluded from this discussion

that *Dar* as a novel not only constitutes an autocommunicative act but attests to an awareness of it in a manner that reflects many of Lotman's theories of artistic inspiration.

Lotman's work on semiotic literary and cultural theories is vast and diverse. Therefore, examining Nabokov's work in such a way as to account for all applicable aspects of Lotman's thinking is well beyond the scope of the present work. Nonetheless, it was my interest in writing this thesis to extend Lotman's thinking beyond what the author accomplished during his career. Edna Andrew's engaging study, which applies Lotman's thought to Evgenii Zamiatin's work, is well worth acknowledging here. However, I do not mean to propose, as Andrews does with Zamiatin, that Nabokov and Lotman share certain "theoretical affinities" (113), although I do not contest her assertion here. My discussion of Nabokov with reference to Lotman is, instead, one based on theoretical appropriateness, especially in a text such as *Dar*, which approaches the creative process in way that inadvertently parallels certain aspects of Lotman's thinking.<sup>57</sup>

One benefit of applying Lotman to Nabokov is that the former's theoretical framework is strongly reader-oriented. This provides the obvious advantage of assessing Nabokov's preoccupation with reading or, more importantly, *rereading*. In the case of *Dar*, this also provides a basis for examining the reader-aspect of Fyodor's character and how he exercises his creativity through the imposition of his own "ideal" text and a subsequent strengthening of his authorial personality through his creative "misreading" of Chernyshevski. In a broader sense, this can be applied to Nabokov's later works, which can be considered literal manifestations of a

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<sup>57</sup> It is worth acknowledging Marina Grishakova's recent work (2006), which examines Nabokov with an emphasis on "thick description," combining the theories of Russian Formalism, the Tartu-Moscow Semiotics School and French and English-language classical and postclassical narratological theories. Grishakova's study, of course, far exceeds the scope of my thesis.

reader's "ideal text" which is imposed upon a given text or group of texts.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, many of Lotman's works are directly concerned with both the cognitive process of inspiration as well as the actual compositional process of an artistic text (Meijer 213). Finally, Lotman's conception accounts for ideological and extra-textual features of Nabokov's works. While Russian Formalist readings certainly account for how Nabokov's fiction "lays bare the device," Lotman's conception offers an approach that accounts for vital pragmatic and contextual conditions that influence the overall semiotic or aesthetic effect they evoke in the reader.

#### 4.2 *Dar* as a *Künstlerroman*

*Dar* is commonly considered an example of a *Künstlerroman* in Nabokov scholarship, yet such a designation is applied with little qualification. There are no existing studies on *Dar* that explicitly examine it within the context of the *Künstlerroman* (although there is one noteworthy study, Uphaus 1967, that examines *Lolita* in this respect). This thesis examines *Dar* with only a cursory glance at the genre of the *Künstlerroman* for contextual purposes. Indeed, considerations of the artist's self-conscious struggle to cultivate an original creative voice are relevant to the study of banality, stereotypes or clichés within the context of the creative process. *Dar* corresponds to Linda Hutcheon's conceptualization of the *Künstlerroman* in which in interpretation is "interiorized, immanent to the work itself, as the narrator or point of view reflect[s] on meaning of his creative experience" (12). More importantly, *Dar* reflects Hutcheon's conceptualization of the self-referential narrative as "an intent to unmask dead conventions by challenging, by mirroring" (18).

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<sup>58</sup> *Nikolai Gogol* and *Otchaianie* demonstrate some parallels to Fyodor's imposition of his authorial personality onto the depiction of his subject. For studies of Nabokov's treatment of Gogol and Dostoevskii, see Bowie (1989) and Naiman (2010: 269-83) respectively.



Nabokov's novel is not a deliberate engagement with the German literary tradition of the *Künstlerroman* or, more broadly speaking, the *Bildungsroman*. Such designations are convenient and even superficial since, as Leonid Livak demonstrates, *Dar* testifies to a covert engagement with Parisian émigré literary debates (164). Livak establishes this engagement by comparing *Dar* to André Gide's *Les Faux-monnayeurs* (1925). Nabokov's apparent aloofness from the Parisian émigré literary scene is deceptive, given that the author betrays a thorough knowledge of its debates. The innovative qualities of *Dar* are just as illusory as its conventional features. In *Dar*, Gide's influence is never directly acknowledged; it is carefully disguised: "Bashing his peers for similar practices, Nabokov stresses disagreement with the way in which they go about artistic borrowing but not with their choice of models" (Livak 195). For Nabokov, who was influenced by Shklovsky, influence proceeds in an oblique manner or in the manner of a knight on a chessboard since "it is forbidden to take the straight road" (Shklovsky, *Knight's Move* 3). In *Dar*, Nabokov himself practices a knight's move in appropriating Gide's techniques (Livak 195).

#### 4.3 *Dar* within Nabokov's Oeuvre

According to Lotman, one may treat a group of texts as a single text. As with an individual novel, it is possible to identify both consistent and anomalous features within that text (*Struktura* 70-71). In this respect, one might view *Dar* within the context of Nabokov's Russian-language novels and as a general advancement of artistic consciousness within its narrators. As Khodasevich suggests in his essay "On Sirine" (253), Nabokov nearly always depicts protagonists who are artists, either overtly or in a disguised manner. Perhaps the only real exception to this convention is Martin Edelweiss of *Podvig* (1932). Otherwise, Nabokov's

Russian-language works involve protagonists who possess at least quasi-artistic sensibilities. Examples of these novels include *Mashenka* (1926), *Korol', dama, valet* (1928), *Sogliadatai* (1930) and *Kamera obskura* (1933).

Martha Dreyer in *Korol', dama, valet* presents what is perhaps Nabokov's earliest attempt to characterize *poshlost'* (Boyd 281) and thus the earliest example of its employment as a literary device. The novel also plays on another theme Nabokov develops in *Dar*: the failing of vision. Martha's husband Kurt Dreyer, for instance, remains blind to his wife's infidelity with Franz. A similar structure is played out in *Kamera obscura*: the protagonists form a love triangle in which the pseudo-artistic figure remains oblivious to the sham (Connolly, *King* 217). In both novels, it is not only banality or philistinism that is foregrounded but also the inability to discern it, a treatment that Fyodor turns on Chernyshevski in *Dar*.

While Luzhin in *Zashchita Luzhina* (1930) can be counted amongst Nabokov's artistic protagonists, it is the short work "Usta k ustam" (1933) in which the author introduces his first writer protagonist. Davydov's study (1982) follows this development through *Otchaianie* (1934), *Priglasenie na kazan'* (1936) and, of course, *Dar* (1938). This series of novels represents the greatest continuity of developing artistic protagonists in Nabokov's Russian-language fiction. The series proceeds from the arrogant solipsist Hermann Karlovich, who realizes too late the banality of his crime, to the perceptive Fyodor who is not only conscious of himself but the world around him as well. Following Cincinnatus of *Priglasenie na kazn'*, Fyodor is the first of Nabokov's characters who does not prove to be a failure as an artist. *Dar* not only demonstrates Nabokov's conviction in choosing a protagonist resembling himself, but also establishes the basis for the dense intertextual masterpieces written in English.

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