

Vladimir Nabokov and the Surprise of Poetry: Reading the Critical Reception of Nabokov's Poetry and "The Poem" and "Restoration"*

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Vladimir Nabokov is a surprising poet.¹ As a question of audience awareness, for many readers, the very designation of Nabokov as a poet comes as a revelation. Although an author amply admired for his ability to stylise and shape to formal perfection his every expression in prose—and thus fully deserving of the epithet 'poetic'—Nabokov is but infrequently identified as a poet, despite an impressive body of poetic writing. Thus, in 1930, long before the renown of his English language works, the émigré Russian critic Gleb Struve could comment in review of Nabokov's third novel that "[f]ew of those presently enraptured by *The Defense* likely know that Sirin [Nabokov] began his literary course as a poet [...]" ("Tvorchestvo Sirina" 3). Struve made this remark at a still relatively early stage in Nabokov's career as a Russian writer at a time when he had over 400 poems in print, including three independent volumes of poetry. As a matter of scholarly reception, confrontation with Nabokov's poetry has often provoked reactions of critical surprise—occasionally in the form of admiration, more often as consternation and rejection—even for those readers aware that the author of such 'poetic' novels as *The Gift* and *Pale Fire* was also a practicing poet. As a result, neither Nabokov's numerous Russian lyrics nor his relatively few English poems have garnered either the quantity or quality of critical response otherwise devoted to his writing. And lastly, as an essential component of an interpretive argument regarding his artistry as a whole, Nabokov's poetry may be

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said to form a constitutive part of his literary identity; surprise, in turn, in terms of both form and content, is central to Nabokov's poetry. In ways fundamental to his artistic project, Nabokov's poetry is *about* astonishment. Surprise is the quintessence of his poetry; it is the fundamental manifestation of poetry's ability to startle and engage perception. Poetic surprise expresses the artistic and hence, for Nabokov, highest form of human engagement with the inexplicable mystery and wonder of existence.

In the following discussion, I intend to examine facets of each of these dimensions of surprise with specific reference to Nabokov's English poetry. I will first comment on the identification of Nabokov as a poet and the reception of, in particular, his English poetry before taking up the notion of surprise in two of his English poems, "The Poem" and "Restoration." Although commentary on Nabokov's rich poetic oeuvre will be limited to these two English poems, the comments could be made in analogous form about his Russian poetry.

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That Nabokov is rarely identified as a poet is astonishing and in itself cause for closer investigation. Even casual reflection promptly reveals the many ways in which Nabokov's oeuvre was shaped by both his literary interest in poetry and the verse of his own composition. Nabokov almost certainly authored over one thousand poems and saw hundreds published in nine volumes of poetry.² In his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov illustrated his adolescent awakening into artistic consciousness with a paradigmatic description of the inspiration for, and composition of, his "first" poem. Several of Nabokov's plays were written in verse, while all of his prose writing—fictional and non-fictional—is consistently marked by the poet's care for cadence and rhythm as well as the euphonic potential of language. Nabokov famously claimed the inability "to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose" (*Strong Opinions* 44). His dramas, short-stories and novels are populated with poets and fes-

tooned with poetry of his own composition; they regularly foreground the theme of poetic inspiration and creation. Nabokov's interest in, and skilled practice of, literary translation is devoted primarily to poetry (or poetic prose); the literary criticism of his émigré years is often dedicated to poetry and poets. As a young author, Nabokov introduced himself to a broad Russian audience with poetry; years later as an established writer, he announced his mid-career transition from Russian to English and acquainted himself with a new, American audience with a poem of 1941 entitled "Softest of Tongues"—a poem which thematises the difficulties of abandoning the "softest of tongues," Russian, for "clumsy tools of stone," English. And finally, as the author of texts which frequently conclude with reference to their narrative beginnings, Nabokov enclosed his entire oeuvre within the matching book-ends of two separate volumes of verse entitled *Stikhi* (*Poems*)—one from 1916 and the other, posthumously, from 1979. Nabokov's artistic world is patently suffused with poetry.

Despite the ample presence of poetry in Nabokov's writing and his clear self-designation as a poet, this facet of his literary identity has never been adequately acknowledged, either within the pre-war Russian émigré literary institution or the post-war world of Anglo-American letters. The reasons for this are manifold and must include the quality and prominence of his prose oeuvre. Equally important, however, has been the relatively negative reception of Nabokov's poetry. The assumed deficiencies of Nabokov's poetry seems to have formed a lasting hindrance to his recognition as a poet. During the 1920s—a period when Nabokov was most active as a poet—he was judged by many a talented though ultimately epigonic poet. Credited as an excellent versifier with a fine ear for language, Nabokov was nonetheless criticised by Russian émigré critics who lamented the purported absence of a distinctly Nabokovian poetic voice. Unable to perceive the characteristics of a still emergent idiom and confused by the relative formal conservatism of Nabokov's verse, critics assumed excessive indebtedness to established poetic models, particularly those from the nineteenth-century Russian tradition of Pushkin, Fet

and Tiutchev. With the increasing acceptance of Nabokov's prose writing, a further consideration was added which contributed to the relative demotion of his poetry: the weakness of Nabokov's poetry was assumed to lie in his "true" artistic calling as a novelist. Gleb Struve summarized and canonized this émigré assessment in 1956. In his retrospective study *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* (*Russian Literature in Exile*), Stuve claimed that, ultimately, Nabokov produced the poetry of a prose writer:

There are in emigration not a few people who deny that Nabokov is a poet and who value only his prose. Nabokov moved from verse to prose, although it would be wrong to say of his prose, as one may of the prose of Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandel'shtam or Pasternak, that it is the prose of a poet. It would be perhaps more accurate to say that his poems are the poems of a prose writer. Some of his poems are wonderful (even amongst those he himself would now probably repudiate); they are capable of seizing and hypnotising one, though in the final analysis there is something lacking in them, some element of final music. With Nabokov, there is a close relationship between prose and poetry. His poems were perfected in accordance with his mastery of the craft of story writing. (170-71)

The influence of Struve's authoritative analysis has been pronounced; its presence may frequently be discerned throughout the few subsequent evaluations of Nabokov's Russian poetry. Nonetheless, while Struve's criticism is plausible and even seems confirmed by Nabokov's gradual—though never total—transition from poetry to prose, it is a critical judgment which has been more often stated than demonstrated. Detailed investigation of Nabokov's poetry was never undertaken by his émigré critics. Instead, émigré criticism tended all too frequently to make perfunctory acknowledgement of his poetry before assimilating it into a larger argument about his qualities as a novelist.³

The ambivalent reception of Nabokov's verse most certainly had as much to do with institutional factors within Russia's imperilled émigré literary institution as with the poetry itself.⁴ For Russia's exile culture of the inter-war years, literature was an exceptionally important, if fragile, vessel for the preservation and continuation of an

otherwise endangered tradition. In the close, unusually self-reflective environment of émigré Russian culture, literary assessments were easily freighted with extra-literary criteria of appraisal. The unusually vociferous polemics which characterized much cultural debate offer external expression of this acute self-reflexivity. Given this extraordinary context, it is unsurprising that Nabokov's writing was also confronted with forms of criticism motivated by criteria other than aesthetic failings or merit. A reading of Nabokov's reception as a poet from the distance of three-quarters of a century indicates that Nabokov's authorial persona was as often the object of criticism as his poetry. Precocity and excessive aestheticism were identified in Nabokov's poetry and tendentially linked to his character and class background. Aleksandr Bakhrakh, for instance, saw evidence in the "ultra-aestheticism" of Nabokov's poetry that "[f]or Sirin 'the new world is blasphemous' and thus he attempts to rescue himself from it, defending himself by creating his own separate world or, more accurately, a semblance of such a world." The "peacocks" and "tea roses" Bakhrakh identified in Nabokov's poetry thus confirmed the supposed "soullessness" and "coldness" of his writing (17). For another émigré critic, Roman Gul', Nabokov was a skilled versifier, though a weak poet: "The rhythms are correct, the meters fitting, everything is in place. This is a fine example of a poet as 'an excellent apprentice.' Knowledge of poetic technique and the poetry of bygone poets is visible. Everything is printed off in threadbare clichés. Nowhere is there the beating of 'his own' pulse" (23). Gul' saw the ultimate source of Nabokov's weakness as poet in his inexperience of the world, his never having travelled beyond his "blue drawing-room" (*golubaia gostinaia*). Still other reviews of his poetry attest to Nabokov's entanglement in the fractious literary polemics of the inter-war years. According to this format, Nabokov and his poetry were tendentially assessed according to what both he and his verse were said to represent in broader, extra-literary contexts.⁵

As an émigré novelist, Nabokov confronted related forms of criticism. He was frequently claimed, for instance, to have simply copied

western European trends in literature to create a form of writing which was then said to suffer, most damningly, from “un-Russian” qualities. The author of “cold” and “soulless” poetry also wrote “un-Russian” novels. Whereas Nabokov was ultimately able to wrest an appreciative audience for his prose, he never won a similar appreciation for his poetry. The impression thus remains that for all of the different types of criticism voiced regarding Nabokov’s poetry, a significant source of reader discomfort resided in the radical autonomy of Nabokov’s artistry. Vera Lur’e, one of the earliest critics of Nabokov’s verse, may thus stand as representative in her inadvertent indication that, whatever its supposedly epigonal character, the independence of Nabokov’s poetry was especially problematic: “This [the boringness imputed to Nabokov’s poetry] does not arise out of deficiencies in the author’s talent; but it is simply not possible to pass by all contemporary artistic achievements and gains, to renounce all movements and schools and to use images which have long ago faded and ceased to be symbols” (23). Lur’e’s censure of Nabokov’s poetry is evocative of the consternation registered by émigré critics upon confrontation with a form of poetry which seemed to refuse assimilation in either contemporary schools of poetry or established paradigms of criticism. Nabokov’s poetry (as with his prose) clearly presented the inter-war, émigré Russian literary institution with the challenge of the new, albeit in the form of the old. A tradition of critical assessment which was conceptually unable to ‘read’ Nabokov’s poetry according to its intrinsic criteria of aesthetic and thematic focus was destined to generate resistance. An analogous form of critical blindness and bewilderment characterises the reception of Nabokov’s English poetry.

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Nabokov’s small but significant body of English poetry constitutes an unexpected and particularly surprising facet of his oeuvre. Nabokov wrote twenty-three English poems, not including his longest poem, the 999-line “Pale Fire” of the eponymous novel. Nabokov published

at least three English poems in his very early twenties while in Cambridge and Berlin. The bulk of his English verse production was composed in the United States, however, in the period from 1941 to 1957, at the beginning of the final of his four stages of poetic production, a stage characterized, as Nabokov himself claimed, by “sparser output and a more robust style” (*Poems and Problems* 13-14). These poems were written and published at irregular intervals—frequently in the *New Yorker*—and subsequently collected for publication in two separate though similar volumes. Fourteen poems appeared in 1959 in Nabokov’s first, slim volume of English poetry entitled *Poems*; in 1970, Nabokov re-published the same fourteen poems, now accompanied by a representative selection of thirty-nine Russian poems in English translation, in the collection entitled *Poems and Problems*. The date of publication of both of these volumes merits a moment’s reflection.

Here, as on previous occasions in his career, the publication of a volume of poetry re-directs attention to the place of poetry in his oeuvre. In 1952, for instance, at a time when he was already based in the United States as an English language author, Nabokov had released *Stikhotvoreniia 1929-1951* (*Poems 1929-1951*) as the final publication of original Russian poetry to appear during his lifetime. With this collection of poetry, Nabokov had marked his departure from the Russian émigré world of letters. In 1959, one year after the literary achievement and *succès de scandale* of *Lolita*’s publication in the United States, Nabokov was able with the publication of *Poems* to capitalize upon the related boons of financial independence and reader interest to project his poetry, however briefly, from the periphery of his oeuvre to its centre.⁶ Likewise, in 1970, Nabokov returned audience awareness to his English and Russian poetry—and translations—with the publication of *Poems and Problems* one year after the sensation caused by *Ada* in 1969 and the mid-1960s tumult over his rigorously literal translation of *Eugene Onegin*.

Whatever Nabokov’s motivation in publishing and then re-publishing a selection of his English poems, a review of the reception of Nabokov’s English poetry reveals that criticism was ill-equipped

conceptually to deal with this facet of his oeuvre. As in the instance of the equivocal reception of Nabokov's Russian poetry between the wars, his post-war English poetry also stumbled over expectations which had as much to do with an emerging critical paradigm concerning the author as with the poetry itself. As a young author of Russian poetry, Nabokov had been a still un-established poet who confounded his émigré audience with technically accomplished, verbally gifted verse which nonetheless seemed to disregard contemporary trends in poetry. In the post-war years, this form of critical recognition was not at issue. Although not identified as a poet, Nabokov was acknowledged as an exceptional writer. As early as 1941, Edmund Wilson had praised Nabokov's first English novel to be published in the United States, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, for the exceptional poetic quality of its prose: "I haven't really told you why I like your book so much. It is all on a high *poetic* level, and you have succeeded in being a first-rate poet in English. It has delighted and stimulated me more than any new book I have read since I don't know what" (Karlinsky 56; emphasis in original). Paradoxically, the high degree of praise accorded by Wilson and others to Nabokov the (poetic) novelist accounts for some of the difficulties in confronting his poetry. The author of *Lolita* and later *Pale Fire* and *Ada* was no longer an unknown entity, but rather a novelist who was being written into critical understanding of post-war American literature—and in particular what was later to be designated postmodernism—as a defining, if at times problematic, influence. This understanding of Nabokov left little space for the critical appreciation of poetry which, more than seeming anachronistic in its non-modernist style, appeared disconcertingly *sui generis*, inassimilable in any established critical paradigm of the novelist or his writing. Critics were plainly surprised and, in a sense, speechless—left groping for an appropriate critical response.

Most of the few reviews to greet Nabokov's first volume of English poetry in 1959, for instance, were benignly positive, perhaps out of respect for his obvious achievements as a prose writer. Nonetheless, as a whole, the reviews display a lack of critical engagement or inter-

pretive specificity which suggests bemused admiration for the poet's verbal dexterity rather than informed comprehension of either the poems themselves or their role within the author's expansive oeuvre. More specifically, the assessments of Nabokov's poetry indicate that it was read against assumptions concerning the phenomenon Nabokov as novelist. *Lolita* loomed large over Nabokov's English poetry. The professional poets and critics James Wright and Anthony Hecht, for instance, explicitly indicate early on in their respective reviews of *Poems* that the poetry is being read as the writing of—in Wright's case—the author of "such novels as *Lolita* and *Pnin*" (378) and—in Hecht's—"the author of a particularly celebrated novel" (593). Perhaps due to associations with *Lolita*'s scandalous subject-matter, both reviews emphasise the purported strangeness and surprise of Nabokov's poetry, with Wright noting "the very monstrosities which Mr. Nabokov likes to describe" and Hecht claiming that "it is occasionally Mr. Nabokov's pleasure to take a particularly grisly subject and write about it in tripping anapests." Hecht, in particular, extends this line of thought to draw general inference regarding Nabokov's authorial stance towards human experience: "In every case, he stands at a polite remove from experience, and even when he deals with violence or madness or the grotesque it is always with flawless social poise" (594). The extent to which "monstrosities," "grisly" subjects, "violence," "madness" or "the grotesque" are in fact a characteristic (or even discernible) quality of Nabokov's poetry is neither demonstrated nor explored. In the poems to be discussed below, for instance, they are not a factor. Initiating a response which would be repeated in most subsequent reviews of Nabokov's English poetry, both Hecht and Wright singled out "An Evening of Russian Poetry," Nabokov's perhaps most accessible English poem, for unqualified praise. Overall, both reviews are positive, especially Wright's: "In any case, I doubt if I have read in a long time a book of poems that gave me so much sheer pleasure in the experience of being entertained" (378). Despite this praise, however, the weight of assessment falls on entertainment; it is apparent that Nabokov's poetry seems a surprising curio, a charming

exercise in linguistic facility to be expected from the author of *Lolita*, though not ultimately an achievement of artistic depth.

Other reviews of *Poems* indicated still greater difficulty in assimilating Nabokov's poetry to a critical paradigm distinct from assumptions about Nabokov the novelist. In his review of *Poems* for the *New York Times Book Review*, the poet Philip Booth expressed general admiration for the "literate wit" and "offbeat perception" of Nabokov's verse (6) without offering interpretive analysis. Chad Walsh's review for the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* indicates his surprise that Nabokov wrote poetry; Walsh identifies Nabokov as the author of *Bend Sinister* and *Lolita* "who now reveals himself as a poet with a sure and sometimes moving touch" (4). Walsh approaches Nabokov's poetry not as the writing of a poet with an extensive oeuvre—albeit in Russian—but as an author who "appears to write poetry as a by-product of an active life, and his verses have the charm of the intermittently kept journals of a highly civilized man." Underlying even these more positively toned reviews is the pervasive suggestion that Nabokov's poetry is "lightweight," the charming dabbling of an author renowned for the ludic appeal of his work.⁷ Charles Tomlinson's review for the *New Statesman* is indicative of the urge to read Nabokov's poetry negatively against a particular set of expectations regarding Nabokov the novelist. In terms of the thrust of its critical strategy, Tomlinson's review is consistent with most of the reviews of *Poems*, all of which seemed to equate linguistic proficiency with an absence of profundity. Where Tomlinson's review diverges from the others is in its expression of outright censure:

Nabokov's *Poems* are chiefly light-weight. They have a fluency that persistently treads on the edge of over-professional facility, and yet often redeems itself by some instinctive grace. "On Translating Eugene Onegin" and particularly "An Evening of Russian Poetry" contain good sketches, a controlled nostalgia, a wit that isn't morbidly slick. There are good jokes in "The Ballad of Longwood Glen," but others again are sadly New Yorkerish whimsy. By and large, words come to him too easily for us to believe he has ever known that resistant silence from which the deeper poetry emerges. (674)

Conceptually prepared for the poetry of a writer of “over-professional facility,” Tomlinson is unable to hear the “resistant silence” contained within Nabokov’s poetry. Anthony Thwaite’s review for *The Spectator* echoed the tenor—and critical vocabulary—of Tomlinson’s expectations and assessment; in his estimation, Nabokov’s poems are “short and slight, all of them [...] extremely clever, sometimes over-clever” (770). For Thwaite, the only poem to rise above “slickness” (in the term borrowed from Tomlinson) was “An Evening of Russian Poetry.”

F. W. Dupee’s article of 1963, “Nabokov: The Prose and Poetry of It All,” has the distinction of being one of the first assessments of Nabokov’s poetry that attempts to treat it as a formative component of Nabokov’s oeuvre, as a portion of his literary identity.⁸ For Dupee, however, the creative deployment of poetry in Nabokov’s oeuvre was of greater interest than the poetry itself. Not unlike Wright, Hecht, Tomlinson and Thwaite, each of whom read Nabokov’s poetry in the shadow of *Lolita*, Dupee begins his brief account of Nabokov’s poetry with reference to Humbert Humbert’s “occasional poems.” Dupee contrasts Humbert’s “obscure and peculiar” efforts with those of his creator Nabokov, claiming that for the latter, the uses of poetry are high. Despite the seriousness of Nabokov’s assumed poetic intentions, however, Dupee draws illustrative comparison with Joyce to indicate that whatever Nabokov’s thoughts on, or the interest of, his verse, the poetry itself is minor:

Like that other master of prose, James Joyce, Mr. Nabokov aspired in youth to be a poet. More than Joyce did, he has continued to write verse and to fill his novels with reflections on poetry. The reflections are often of major importance; the verse—the verse in English at least—is minor, as minor as verse could be and still remain interesting. (133)

Despite this indication of limited expectations of Nabokov’s poetry, Dupee nonetheless offers perceptive comments regarding the place of poetry in Nabokov’s writing, especially in his final Russian novel, *The Gift*. Dupee reads Nabokov’s poetry in the context of his prose, though

he explicitly refutes the possible conclusion that, as an artist, Nabokov has “sacrificed” poetry to prose; reference to the poetry of *Poems* indicates that this has not happened. Although Nabokov’s poems as a whole are identified as “minor,” “An Evening of Russian Poetry” is identified as “great” with regard to its quality of “wit mingled with lyrical delight.” For Dupee, in general “[t]he English poems do have a peculiar miniature excellence: perfect lucidity, precise wit, the glow of a lighted candle cupped in an expert hand against the windy verse roundabout” (139). Extending out of this relative praise and his brief analysis of *Pale Fire*, Dupee sees the ultimate value of Nabokov’s poetry in his ability to combine it with his prose, making “a team” of “the poet and novelist in him” (141). Here, too, analysis of Nabokov’s poetry returns to, and culminates in, comment on a novel.

Sustained commentary on Nabokov’s English poetry is not to be encountered again until after the publication of *Poems and Problems* in 1970. In a manner similar to the response which greeted *Poems*, the response to the English poems and translations of *Poems and Problems* reveals the long shadow of an emergent critical understanding of Nabokov the provocative novelist, but also translator of *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov the poet was read as the assumed author of non-mimetic, metafictional novels, the fabulator. Marianne K. Hultquist’s brief comment on *Poems and Problems* is indicative of this tendency: “Although it is slyly deceptive, *Poems and Problems* emphasizes the deception and artifice of which Nabokov is capable both through the translations of the Russian poems and the array of chess problems—a sort of metaphor for the chop-logic that characterizes fictional worlds” (271). The anonymous author of the mention of *Poems and Problems* in *The Booklist* limited reference to Nabokov’s English poems to a negatively formulated subordinate clause: “Although the English poems are insubstantial, the chess problems, recently composed, exhibit Nabokov’s characteristic dexterity and complexity” (27). Howard Nemerov’s review for *The New York Times Book Review* betrays puzzlement at the presence of chess problems as well as Russian poems with translations. Positive reference is made to three unquoted, un-

analysed English poems, although the general tone suggests that the poems are to be read as a novelty produced by an otherwise great author: interesting but of limited lasting value: "Nabokov's poems written in English are in large part deft and neat and not much more, some of them not far from cute [...]. Maybe it will be best to regard this book as a sort of souvenir for the author's many readers, the record of some diversions of a master" (5). Writing in *The Listener*, Francis Wyndham takes up reference to the chess problems in the volume to assert a negatively connotated sense of trickery in Nabokov's poetry: "I can see some slight resemblance between Nabokov's problems and his *New Yorker* poems, which are full of witty ingenuities and cunningly planted shocks, slyly forcing the vernacular into a classic mode and refurbishing the banal with baroque elaboration. This type of verse can often be either facetious or sentimental—and there is a very faint hint of both qualities here" (116). In Wyndham's reading, Nabokov's English verse is little more than the deceptive adornment of banality in classic poetic form—potentially an advantage in chess problems, but not in poetry.

The review of *Poems and Problems* by the poet and critic Richard Lattimore for the *Hudson Review* also reveals the tendency to read Nabokov's poetry through assumptions regarding his literary persona—a persona constructed by a literary institution insufficiently aware of the dimensions of Nabokov's oeuvre. Lattimore's review deals first with Nabokov's Russian verse in English translation and then with the English poetry. His comments on Nabokov's translated poems comprise the longest section of the review, and are framed less as criticism of the poetry than as implicit opposition to Nabokov's theories of literal translation. The second section of the review is devoted to Nabokov's English poetry and derives from Lattimore's negative reading of Nabokov's translations. Although positive in thrust, the assessment of Nabokov's English verse nonetheless remains negative in tone and implication: "In most of the English-composed poems (but not in the unaccountable 'Ballad of Longwood Glen'), the awkwardness [of the translations] vanishes. Nabokov's

virtuosity in English is manifest from his prose, tiresome as that can sometimes be" (507). Indicative of his begrudging praise is Lattimore's positive reference to "An Evening of Russian Poetry" which nonetheless pivots on negatively formulated assumptions concerning Nabokov: "Always the one-upman, Nabokov patronizes his imaginary audience and his reader: this poem is, nevertheless, mellow, beautiful, and wise" (508).

Analysis of Nabokov's poetry was filtered through more than expectations and perceptions of the literary persona Nabokov. As intimated in Lattimore's review, critics also approached *Poems and Problems* from the perspective of their response to Nabokov's controversial espousal of literal translation. Writing in *Time*, John Skow began his review entitled "Drinker of Words" with criticism of Nabokov's literal self-translations. Skow illustrates his contention with reference to a single (!) word—caprifole for *zhimolost'*—as an example which is meant to prove that Nabokov was capriciously obscure in his use of language. It is this assessment, emerging from a reading of his translation, that colours Skow's reading of Nabokov's poems in general; for Skow, Nabokov is "a provincial linguistic pedant," "an overrefined rhymester" (67). Thus, although Nabokov is judged "an expert poet," he is also construed as a cunning, but ultimately frivolous wordsmith, "a pleasing and self-pleased illusionist" (68). Konstantin Bazarov, in his review for *Books and Bookmen*, also approached Nabokov first as a translator and secondly as a poet, stating that *Poems and Problems* as a book "raises a whole series of different problems about Nabokov both as a translator of his own and other people's work and as an original creative writer" (xii).⁹ According to Bazarov, for Nabokov "art is also a game, with Nabokov as a player whose approach to writing is that of an intellectual puzzle-maker producing artefacts which are all clever construction and stylistic acrobatics, an aesthete trapping glittering bejewelled butterflies in his lepidopterist's net" (xii). Only in the final lines of his review does Bazarov proceed—without analysis—to comment on Nabokov's poetry. While some of the later Russian poems are deemed "very fine indeed," Nabokov's English po-

ems, except for “An Evening of Russian Poetry,” are dismissed as “mere lighthearted squibs” (xii).

Nabokov’s English poetry was not assessed via reference to *Lolita* and his theories of translation alone, however. As in the instance of F. W. Dupee’s comments, *Pale Fire* also served as a conduit of approach to Nabokov’s verse.¹⁰ The anonymous review of *Poems and Problems* in the *Times Literary Supplement*, for instance, begins its discussion of Nabokov the poet with reference to Nabokov the author of *Pale Fire*. Justification for this approach is quickly provided—Nabokov is “primarily a novelist” (984). Nabokov’s poetry is reduced to subordinate status on the basis of a set of assumptions regarding Nabokov the gamester and novelist: “Higher games, charades, impersonations, the evocations of the ghost of the author when he was young and somebody else, chips from the workshop, so these poems by a novelist may be termed.” With this conceptual preparation, it is but consistent (however erroneous) that the English poems should eventually be designated “neatly constructed memoranda rather than attempts to find an equivalent for mood or feeling.” And like Dupee, though without his insight, the anonymous reviewer comes to a comparison with Joyce to claim that “the subtle and various exploitation of language to the end of expressing complex states of feeling and thinking” which is missing in the poetry “is reserved for the novels.” Although not as negative as Tomlinson, the anonymous reviewer, too, essentially suggests that Nabokov’s poetry lacks depth.

Even a brief review of the reception of his English poetry thus reveals that Nabokov’s poetry suffered from the surprise it produced. Unable to find a critical vocabulary with which to articulate an adequate response to Nabokov’s verse, critics attempted instead to assimilate the poetry into an accepted understanding of the novelist. Accordingly, Nabokov the master prose-writer was seen to write poetry either as a pale imitation of his achievement in prose, or as an exercise in literary gamesmanship. The harbinger of the ‘postmodern,’ the skilled manipulator of generic form in the formulation of non-mimetic fiction did not write intricately rhymed verse in iambic te-

trameter, and if he did, then only as a diverting pastime or in the sly, “lightweight” play of parody. This process both parallels *and* contrasts with the émigré reception of Nabokov’s Russian verse. In this earlier instance, too, suspicion regarding the quality and intent of Nabokov’s poetry induced critics to develop interpretive paradigms derived from extra-literary criteria—most commonly in appeal to an understanding of Nabokov the novelist; in contrast, while Nabokov’s émigré critics claimed to see in his verse the heavy influence of an entire panoply of poets, his Anglo-American critics were unable or unwilling to link him to anything but his own challenging literary voice. Common to both histories of reception, however, is the inability to move from the necessarily superficial level of journalistic assessment to a more comprehensive, rigorous level of scholarly investigation actually based on Nabokov’s poetry.

It is here, in reversal of a trajectory of critical analysis which leads from poetry to prose, that consideration of surprise in Nabokov’s poetry may be shown to be illustrative of a principle essential to Nabokov’s artistry as a whole. In fundamental ways, Nabokov’s verse is about, and based upon, surprise. Analysis of two English language poems by Nabokov which foreground the principle of surprise, “The Poem” and “Restoration,” indicate the ways in which surprise is programmatic to Nabokov’s artistry, particularly with regard to the revelatory role accorded by Nabokov to metaphor. For Nabokov, the surprise of poetry emanates from its ability to startle and transform perception. Given the importance to be accorded Nabokov’s poetry as the mediator between consciousness and world, comments on these particular poems will be prefaced with brief initial remarks concerning Nabokov’s views on consciousness. “The Poem” and “Restoration” will then be read to illustrate the aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions of Nabokov’s poetics of surprise, and also to suggest the value of Nabokov’s poetry for a fuller understanding of his artistry.

As Brian Boyd has suggested, Nabokov's artistic project is in significant ways concerned with the mystery of consciousness (*Nabokov's Ada* 67), which is perhaps most fully explored in *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov's autobiography literally begins and ends with the surprise of consciousness, and famously describes existence as a series of ascending stages—a helix spiralling in four upward turns from space into time, then into human consciousness within space-time and from there, potentially at least, into a fourth realm of transcendent consciousness unconstrained by the restraints of either time or space (301). For the consummate artist Nabokov, the summit of human activity in life, the pinnacle of experience within the third spiral of the helix of being, is the exercise of the creative consciousness, in particular, though not exclusively, in art. This is most directly apparent in chapter 11 of *Speak, Memory*, the chapter devoted to Nabokov's adolescent initiation into the wonder of inspiration and creative activity in his pivotal account of his first poem. Nabokov's stylised recreation of the experience attendant to the writing of his first paradigmatic poem is not of importance in the first instance as a record of a single poem—in the narrative of *Speak, Memory* the poem in question is not even reproduced in verse form. In Nabokov's chapter-length retelling, the poem is essential as a sign of his awakening into an exceptionally privileged form of consciousness, the consciousness of the artist-poet. Essentially, Nabokov identifies poetic creation as an epistemological enterprise, the expression of a fundamental impulse to apprehend the surrounding environment, and then to recast it according to the inclinations of the poet's imagination. In Nabokov's words from *Speak, Memory*: "[...] all poetry is positional: to try to express one's position in regard to the universe embraced by consciousness, is an immemorial urge. The arms of consciousness reach out and grope, and the longer they are the better. Tentacles, not wings, are Apollo's natural members" (218). This relatively simply stated though far-reaching discursive claim is likewise repeatedly enacted in artistic form throughout Nabokov's fictional universe, particularly in the illustrative experiences of his various fictional poets. *The Gift*, for instance,

begins with the young poet-author contemplating a street scene with the intention of storing it away as a scene with which “to start a good, thick, old-fashioned novel” (4). Here, the protagonist’s consciousness is witnessed reaching out to feel and probe his environment. *Pale Fire* likewise contains a scene illustrative of the poet’s apprehension of the world. Charles Kinbote, the mad, obsessively observant companion to John Shade, witnesses Nabokov’s greatest of fictional poets doing that which, according to Nabokov, is essential to the poet: “[...] perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, recombining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse” (27).

Nabokov’s statement about the “positional” role of poetry and Kinbote’s observation about a line of verse as “an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music” brings discussion to Nabokov’s poem of 1944, “The Poem,” which provides direct insight into the demands and expectations made of poetry by Nabokov and the metaphysical sources of inspiration and artistic creation.¹¹ The following is the poem in its entirety:

Not the sunset poem you make when you think aloud,
with its linden tree in India ink
and the telegraph wires across its pink cloud;

not the mirror in you and her delicate bare
shoulder still glimmering there;
not the lyrical click of a pocket rhyme—
the tiny music that tells the time;

and not the pennies and weights on those
evening papers piled up in the rain;
not the cacodemons of carnal pain;
not the things you can say so much better in plain prose—

but the poem that hurtles from heights unknown
—when you wait for the splash of the stone
deep below, and grope for your pen,
and then comes the shiver, and then—

in the tangle of sounds, the leopards of words,
 the leaflike insects, the eye-spotted birds
 fuse and form a silent, intense,
 mimetic pattern of perfect sense. (*Poems and Problems* 157)

“The Poem” begins with the speaker’s rejection of the conventional in poetry. In anaphoric repetitions, the first three stanzas enumerate what a true poem is not. Standardized subject matter such as sunsets, the self-generated lyricism of a conventional muse, social concerns and carnal lust are all dismissed as “the things you can say so much better in plain prose.” Likewise rejected is the mechanized formal structure of such poetry—“the lyrical click of a pocket rhyme”—here marked in the “aloud”-“cloud” *consonne d’appui* rhyme of the first stanza, itself appended to the triple rhyme “think”-“ink”-“pink.” Opposed to this is the poem whose source is an external, transcendent sphere “from heights unknown,” a source of inspiration which, although seemingly extraneous, somehow emerges from “deep below” in the poet’s consciousness. The source “deep below” of the preferred type of poetry is not only described in the text of the poem, but also prepared for—and illustrated—in its prosody. Both an enjambment and, more skilfully, the anapaestic rhythm of the line “when you wait for the splash of the stone” enforce a “wait” for the delayed revelation of “deep below” in the succeeding line.

Unlike that which is rejected as the subject matter of “plain prose,” the substance of the ideal poem is neither delineated nor described; rather, emphasis is placed on its creation in metaphor and its necessarily revelatory effect. The final two quatrains of “The Poem” implement the ideal of a perfect poem by utilizing metaphoric imagery which illustrates its goal rather than describing it. Through the use of metaphors of organic, exotic imagery, the final quatrain enacts the perfect poem’s sudden, surprising revelation of meaning, the conveyance of sense in a manner more immediate and compact—“silent, intense”—than that available to prose. Through the hastened accumulation of metaphors which conclude in a declarative statement, the very texture of experience is revealed and the mind allowed suddenly

to see with perfect clarity, almost intuitively, the meaning previously camouflaged “in the tangle of sounds, the leopards of words.” Significantly, “The Poem,” itself an example of the kind of poetry it advocates, ends in asserting renewed representational contact with the world of experience, a “mimetic pattern of perfect sense.” “The Poem” thus succeeds not only in describing what a poem is, but also in allowing the reader to experience an analogous sense of lyric wonder and discovery in reading the poem. In this respect, “The Poem” itself illustratively enacts poetry’s effect on consciousness and the sudden, wondrous arrival of lyric meaning which takes consciousness to new, transformed awareness of the world. Given the link forged by poetry between consciousness and world, it is not surprising that Nabokov should use an image similar to the one concluding this poem when, in *Speak, Memory*, he comments on his supposition of a child’s first experience of consciousness: “It occurs to me that the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth obtainable is the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvelously disguised insect or bird” (298). Both poetry and the plunge into consciousness provide a “stab of wonder” when the world is revealed to be other than what it was previously perceived to be.

“The Poem” thus demonstrates the aesthetic dimension of Nabokov’s poetics of epiphanic revelation, of surprise; it both describes and advocates a form of poetry which effects a transformed perception of the world. Nabokov’s 1952 poem “Restoration” also begins with the mysteries and potential of consciousness, but expands thematically to provide poetic treatment not only of Nabokov’s aesthetics, but also his metaphysics. “Restoration,” one of Nabokov’s most intriguing poems, suggests that poetry is allied to consciousness in its capability to reveal unseen facets about both this world and a beyond.¹² Less a lesson than the surprise of sudden revelation or discovery, poetry is divulged in this poem to afford entrance into the mystery of existence, to act as a portal to another dimension of ex-

panded consciousness. Divided into six five-line stanzas of iambic tetrameter with alternating aabba rhymes, the first three stanzas of the poem allude to the mysterious, ineffable source of poetry, while the second half returns to the mundane, yet ever wondrous, realia of life and the world. At once a meditation on the mysteries of an intuited beyond and identification of the investigative, epistemological function of poetry, "Restoration" pivots on the revelatory potential of art to surprise and expand perception.

To think that any fool may tear
by chance the web of when and where.
O window in the dark! To think
that every brain is on the brink
of nameless bliss no brain can bear,

Unless there be no great surprise—
as when you learn to levitate
and, hardly trying, realize
—alone, in a bright room—that weight
is but your shadow, and you rise.

My little daughter wakes in tears:
She fancies that her bed is drawn
into a dimness which appears
to be the deep of all her fears
but which, in point of fact, is dawn.

I know a poet who can strip
a William Tell or Golden Pip
in one uninterrupted peel
miraculously to reveal,
revolving on his fingertip,

a snowball. So I would unrobe,
turn inside out, pry open, probe
all matter, everything you see,
the skyline and its saddest tree,
the whole inexplicable globe,
to find the true, the ardent core
as doctors of old pictures do
when, rubbing out a distant door

or sooty curtain, they restore
the jewel of a bluish view. (*Poems and Problems* 167-68)¹³

“Restoration” opens with an invocation of the mysterious fragility of the lightly veiled boundary—“the web of when and where”—separating physical existence in time and space from the expanses of a transcendental realm, what Nabokov described in the previously cited passage as the fourth spiral in the helix of being. In the third-line apostrophe, “O window in the dark!,” Nabokov explicitly draws on the image of a window—a motif of transition prevalent throughout all of his poetry—to convey the simplicity of the shift to a blissful state of consciousness. Referred to here is the miraculous conquering of the physical laws of being via an act of consciousness. The brink to nameless bliss is a transition as potentially innocuous as the windowed aperture from the house of being to the unknown dark expanses outside. The move to another dimension is as simple, or as surprising, as levitation. The second stanza of “Restoration” expresses a variation of a theme common to Nabokov’s poetry: mysterious travel in the rapture of consciousness altered and expanded by, especially, inspiration or love. Here, a privileged form of consciousness is shown to conquer the reason-bound laws of causality and rationality. In the next stanza, we learn that this levitating escape from the physical to enter into another state may appear frightening in its strangeness, in the radical change it portends; it is “a dimness which appears / to be the deep of all her fears.” Rather than a depth and the end of being, however, this “dimness” is actually a transition to another dimension of consciousness; in the metaphoric terms of time and an awakening from the sleep of physical life, it is a form of Platonic anamnesis, a new beginning at “dawn.”

The beginning of the transitional, fourth stanza redirects the movement of the poem from the metaphysical to the aesthetic with abrupt reference to artistic practice. Here, as was illustrated in the above-discussed image of the suddenly revealed bird in “The Poem” and in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov links the consciousness of the poet with that of a child’s in its capacity for surprise and wonderment. In stanza

three, it is the speaker's young daughter, a child, who intuitively and instinctively senses (and accepts) without conscious reflection the thinness of the boundaries of time and space. In stanza four, it is the poet with the conscious dexterity of his artistry who purposefully effects this transformation. Nabokov illustrates the function of poetry in a multi-layered metaphor about the ability of a poet to peel an apple—itsself metaphorically named—suddenly to reveal, after the delay of accumulating descriptive phrases and an enjambment at a stanza-break, the apple's metaphoric likeness, a snowball. Here it is the conjuror Nabokov describing the working of poetry through metaphoric reference to a poet who magically removes a thin boundary, an apple peel, to disclose not what is expected, but something transformed by poetry and metaphor into something surprisingly different. This, the poem suggests, is the epistemological potential unique to poetry. Stanza five in particular, with its accumulation of verbs of tactile exploration ending with "see," enacts Nabokov's comment from *Speak, Memory* of the poet's consciousness reaching out to probe the surrounding world. Poetry harnesses and utilizes the creatively associative, conjunctive potential of metaphor to initiate a process of discovery and disclosure, leading to revelation of the specificities and mysteries of "the whole inexplicable globe," and beyond. Poetry provides a privileged form of knowing capable of reaching beyond the known and accepted. In his article "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov suggested that the goal of metaphors is to "follow the course of their secret connections" (*Lectures* 373). And, in a manner analogous to the frequent thematic motifs of transition within Nabokov's writing, metaphors are vehicles of transition between surprising associations of both physical and metaphysical import. It is metaphor which allows Nabokov to unite in a single poetics his fascination for an intuited, ineffable metaphysical dimension *and* wonder at the specificity and quiddity of phenomenal existence. Metaphor and poetry encourage renewed, sharpened awareness not only of the multi-layered texture of reality but of previously unperceived correspondences to further dimensions of consciousness.

For the poet not only probes the phenomenal world, but removes the “distant door,” the “sooty curtain” providing access to previously unperceived realms of awareness. This poetics of the metaphor is not so much the modernist project to “make it new” as a self-reflective exercise in decorative brilliance, but the Nabokovian one to “make it revelatory,” transformative—in short, surprising and epiphanic. Poetry is both a product of artistic consciousness *and* an enhancement of consciousness; it is a response to the world *and* its transformation. In this regard, “Restoration” provides concise illustration for Robert Alter’s essential comment about Nabokov’s entire creative project:

Nabokov has often been celebrated for his brilliance as a stylist; but it is important to recognize that this brilliance [...] is not ornamental, as in some of his American imitators, but *the necessary instrument of a serious ontological enterprise*: to rescue reality from the bland nonentity of stereotypicality and from the terrifying rush of mortality by reshaping objects, relations, existential states, through the power of metaphor and wit, so that they become endowed with an arresting life of their own. (105-06; emphasis added)

The “restoration” of Nabokov’s title takes on an added layer of significance in the context of Alter’s identification of the urge in Nabokov’s writing to engage the world through his art. And what Alter says here about Nabokov’s writing in general is particularly relevant to his poetry: Nabokov’s poetry of surprise is capable of uncovering and granting access to the quintessence of being, “the ardent core” of an ultimately “inexplicable globe,” while metaphor, in “rubbing out a distant door / or sooty curtain” removes the boundaries of the physical, and containment in the literal, to afford unexpected vistas onto something beyond, the “jewel of a bluish view.” Poetry, with its surprising, even irrational leaps of association, takes consciousness to dimensions closed to “plain prose.”

“Restoration” and “The Poem” thus not only illustrate the importance of surprise to the aesthetic and metaphysical dimensions of Nabokov’s artistic project, but bear witness to the relevance of his poetry for a comprehensive understanding of his use of literature to effect the positioning of consciousness in the world of experience. The

potential of his verse to aid in an essential realignment of critical understanding of his entire oeuvre is perhaps the ultimate surprise to be experienced in reading Nabokov's poetry.

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NOTES

¹The following is a revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the 8th International *Connotations* Symposium, "Textual Surprises," in 2005.

²The question as to the exact number of poems Nabokov wrote is difficult to answer with certainty. Nabokov himself suggested that the thirty-nine poems translated into English for publication in the 1970 *Poems and Problems* "[...] represent only a small fraction—hardly more than one percent—of the steady mass of verse which I began to exude in my early youth, more than half a century ago, and continued to do so, with monstrous regularity, especially during the twenties and thirties" (*Poems and Problems* 13). Barry P. Scherr is undoubtedly correct when he suggests that "[e]ven if the poetry found within his prose works and his translations is left aside, he still published over 500 poems in Russian along with nearly two dozen in English" (106).

³As representative of this tendency, see, for instance, the first sentence from a review by German Khokhlov devoted to Nabokov's 1929 collection of short stories and poems, *The Return of Chorb*: "In order to see Nabokov in his full stature, it is necessary to read his novels" (190).

⁴Evaluation of the record of Nabokov's reception as an émigré Russian poet is fraught with difficulty. Although the criticism of Nabokov the poet was generally negative, the reasons for this assessment were often contradictory. For a more detailed, though still incomplete, review of Nabokov's reception as an émigré poet, see my "Vladimir Nabokov's Poetry in Russian Émigré Criticism: A Partial Survey."

⁵In one particularly infamous example of *ad hominem* attack, for instance, Georgii Ivanov, a figure closely associated with the "Parisian Poets," claimed that Nabokov's poems were "simply vulgar" and thereby as deserving of censure as the unnamed critic of an earlier review who had suggested that Nabokov was "an exceptional master of verse" (235). See Boyd for a full account of the background to Ivanov's attack (*The Russian Years* 350). Gleb Struve, in a review of Nabokov's poetry for *Rossiiia i slavianstvo* in 1930, directly and positively contrasted Nabokov's poetry to that of the so-called "Parisian Poets" centered around the influential émigré critics Georgii Adamovich and Georgii Ivanov.

⁶D. Barton Johnson first referred to this possibility with his perceptive observation that this was "a rare opportunity [for Nabokov] to define his *oeuvre* for posterity" (312).

⁷The charge of “lightness” was a critical assessment also levelled at Nabokov’s prose. A few years after the publication of *Poems*, for instance, the earliest reviews of *Pale Fire* would frequently—and equally erroneously—suggest the same.

⁸F. W. Dupee was, famously, the scholar and former editor of the *Partisan Review* who provided the article in *Anchor Review* which accompanied the first publication of excerpts from *Lolita* for an American audience in 1957.

⁹Interestingly, Bazarov’s analysis of Nabokov the “failed” translator-poet begins with criticism of the same single example chosen by Skow—Nabokov’s use of the word “caprifole” as the translation for *zhimolost’* in the poem “The Rain Has Flown.” As in the reception of Nabokov’s Russian poetry, the repetition of isolated points of criticism—down to the vocabulary deployed—suggests that critical opinion was frequently being recycled rather than independently formulated.

¹⁰The problematic reception of *Pale Fire* upon its publication in 1962 may also be read, at least in part, as a consequence of the inability of critics to accommodate the poetry of the novel. Many of the earliest negative reviews of the novel display angered incomprehension upon confrontation with the poem “Pale Fire.” See for instance Dwight MacDonald’s negative though judiciously intended review of the novel and poem: “The most that can be said for the poem is that it is often good pastiche (though more often doggerel). [...] But the torrent of virtuosity deafens one to whatever meaning the poet may have been trying to communicate” (439-40). As in the rejection of Nabokov’s poetry, much of the early reception of *Pale Fire* seems also to have been determined as much by perceptions of the assumed literary goals of the author as by the work itself.

¹¹Throughout his poetic oeuvre, Nabokov frequently returned to similarly terse titles such as “The Poet” or “The Poem.” The titles of several of his collections of poetry—as with those of John Shade—are variations of the title *Poems*. This brevity would seem to indicate the synecdochic relation of particular poems and volumes of poetry to his poetic writing in general.

¹²See Zoran Kuzmanovich’s “Strong Opinions and Nerve Points: Nabokov’s Life and Art” for an analysis which uses the poem as a suggestive text in the reading of various motifs from Nabokov’s life and works.

¹³Brian Boyd records that Nabokov composed “Restoration” in haste on the occasion of an invitation to offer a poetry reading “in the Morris Gray poetry series at Harvard’s Sever Hall, in a season that had begun with William Carlos Williams and would end with Wallace Stevens” (*The American Years* 216).

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