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Carmencita: Blok's Del'mas and Nabokov's Shulgina: The Evolution of Eros in Nabokov's Work

Priscilla Meyer

Wesleyan University, pmeyer@wesleyan.edu

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The Evolution of Eros in Nabokov’s Work

“Non sum qualis eram bonae sub Regno Cynarae”

--Horace and Ernest Dowson

Nabokov’s characters Ganin, Humbert Humbert and Van Veen become increasingly obsessed with their first loves as Nabokov himself moves further from his own in time. He crafts this theme using the figure of Carmen and the poetry of Alexander Blok, heightening the distinction between his characters’ helpless fixations and his own commentary on the distortions nostalgia inflicts.

In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov implicitly addresses enduring first love when he refers to Tamara as “my Cynara” (248). The reference is to Christopher Ernest Dowson’s best-known and much anthologized poem, “Cynara,” published with the title “Non sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regno Cynarae” (I am no more the man I was in the reign of the good Cynara) (1896), written about the poet’s unrequited love for an eleven year-old waitress named Adelaide. Philip Healey summarizes Dowson’s tragedy:

His whole adult life was dominated by an event in 1889, when he met and fell in love with the eleven-year old daughter of a Polish restaurant owner in London’s West End. Dowson would eat regularly at the restaurant…just to be in Adelaide’s presence. In 1897, Adelaide, [then] nineteen years old, rejected Dowson and married a young tailor. Dowson’s love for the girl child cast a shadow over both his emotional development and his poetry. His life disintegrated into alcoholism and homelessness until his death from tuberculosis in 1900 at…thirty-two. Dowson’s fate is a caricature of the pain Nabokov continually exorcises with each evocation of
the theme of a lost first love.

In “Cynara,” Dowson describes his dissolute life, concluding each stanza with “But I was desolate and sick of an old passion/…I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! In my fashion,” and Nabokov uses the name only when he is in Crimea, where he is being regularly unfaithful to his first love, Valentina Shulgina. Dowson’s title is taken from an ode (*carmen*) by Horace, “To Venus,” in which the poet begs the goddess to take pity on his age:

> After a long cessation, O Venus, again are you stirring up tumults? Spare me, I beseech you, I beseech you. I am not the man I was under the dominion of good-natured Cynara. Forbear, O cruel mother of soft desires, to bend one bordering upon fifty, now too hardened for soft commands: go, whither the soothing prayers of youths invoke you. (The Fourth Book of the Odes, I)

By efficiently invoking both poems by the name Cynara in *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov alludes to the distance between his own passion at sixteen and his age at the time of writing the memoir. With a hindsight he knows his readers will share in 1966, Nabokov distinguishes the autobiographical nostalgia he carefully evokes from Humbert Humbert’s, whose homelessness, alcoholism and early death caused by the loss of his girl child Lolita echo Dowson’s fate.

The autobiographical nature of Nabokov’s art and the unusual degree to which his art is motivated by the transformation of his experience has been elegantly formulated by Maria Malikova and others. For Nabokov, the Carmen theme with all its intense personal and literary associations, particularly Pushkin’s “Gypsies” and Mérimée’s “Carmen” as well as Blok’s cycle of poems, “Carmen,” evokes memories of his childhood and youth on the Vyra and Rukavishnikov estates, especially of his first sexual relationship.

recently heard” (kak pela Karmen v nedavno slyshannoi opere) (italics mine, PM). The 1966 correction suggests that Nabokov made the Carmen theme less conspicuous and less specific to Colette after featuring it prominently in Lolita.

Alexander Dolinin remarks that “…the American ditty ‘Carmen,’ rephrased by H.H., refers to Blok’s cycle of the same name…” Blok’s Carmen cycle only alludes to the stabbing/shooting of Carmen that take place in “Little Carmen,” Mérimée’s story and Bizet’s opera. Blok is more fascinated by the passionate intensity of both the gypsy heroine and the dark-haired mezzo soprano he saw in the role. He dedicated the cycle of ten poems published in 1914 to the opera singer, Liubov’ Alexandrovna Del’mas. In 1916 Nabokov published his collection, “Poems” (Stikhi), sixty-eight poems written about his first love, Valentina (“Liusia”) Shulgina, whom he names “Tamara” in Speak, Memory. The juxtaposition of these two poets’ loves illuminates Nabokov’s erotic history and highlights the opposition between the two predominant types of his female characters in Mary, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, The Gift, Lolita and Ada, the femme fatale and the faithful helpmeet. In Nabokov’s retrospective portrait of his first love as it appears in Mary and the autobiographies, he follows a method he describes in Strong Opinions: he enhances his “remembered image with an added refraction” and provides “informative links with earlier or later patches of the past” (SO, 143). Blok’s cycle about his love for “Liuba” Del’mas merges the woman with the role she played in Bizet’s opera; his poems help to determine Nabokov’s perception of and later depiction of “Liusia” Shulgina. Nabokov in turn “add[s] a refraction” by adorning the image of Liusia with that of Carmen as she appears in Bizet’s opera and in Blok’s poetry, a composite which helped to determine the passionate type of female character in his fiction.

However limited Nabokov’s early appreciation of Blok may have been, the stylistics of his early poetry support his later claims to have been reading Blok from the ages from ten to
“Ever since [my boyhood] I have been passionately fond of Blok’s lyrics.” He would then have read Blok in St. Petersburg literary journals in 1914 when the “Carmen” poems appeared, the first three in “Musagetes.” Eight of them were published, for the first time with the full dedication (“Dedicated to Liubov’ Aleksandrovna Del’mas”), in the journal, Liubov’ k trem apel’sinam (Love of Three Oranges), Nn. 4/5, in 1914. The two that were not included there first appeared in “Dneviki pisatelei” (Writers’ Diaries) 1914, N. 2.

When Nabokov met Liusia in July of 1915, then, he was already primed with these poetic associations among Blok, Del’mas and Carmen. Nabokov connects his account of their love in Speak, Memory, as he does that of his father’s death, to the poetry of Alexander Blok.

“Tamara”/Liusia approaches gradually, first as a hypothetical Tamara in chapter eleven, and then through writing her name on sand, bench, and fence of the Nabokovs’ estate, “as if Mother Nature were giving me mysterious advance notices of Tamara’s existence” (229), before she finally appears in person. In these descriptions, as well as the one of the couple’s parting at the end of chapter twelve, Nabokov associates Blok and gypsy songs. Nabokov first mentions Blok in describing one of the sources of his first poem, the tsiganske romansy played on the family phonograph, which, he writes, “at their best,…were responsible for the works of true poets (I am thinking especially of Alexander Blok)” (224). He foretells Tamara’s advent also in the context of gypsy songs; he describes his first poem about the “loss of a beloved mistress—Delia, Tamara or Lenore—whom I had never lost, never loved, never met but was all set to meet, love, lose” as derivative of “lyrics of the tsigansky type” (225). Chapter twelve begins by connecting the impending historical upheavals looming in July 1915 with “the verse of Alexander Blok” (229). When he meets Tamara by chance on a train in 1917, after they have separated, he connects the bluish bogs and burning peat to Blok’s description of them: “It can be proved, I think, by published records, that Alexander Blok was even then noting in his diary the very peat smoke I saw” (241).

Another (more ambiguous, but telling) mention of gypsies in connection with Tamara
supports the idea that Nabokov saw Liusia as a kind of Carmen figure. When, after their first summer together, they return to Petersburg the following winter and haunt the backrooms of the Russian Museum of Alexander III in search of privacy, the couple finds a room with “repellently academic paintings” where hangs “‘The Head of a Young Gypsy’ by Harlamov” (235). This is an oddly gender-neutral translation of Aleksei Alekseevich Kharlamov’s Golova mal’chika-tsigan which could have easily been translated “Head of a Gypsy Boy.” In Drugie berega Nabokov goes out of his way to be vague about the title, although in the Russian memoir it is unambiguously masculine—"'Golovka tiganenka’ (tochnee ne pomniu).” Possibly in the first version of his autobiography Nabokov was simply being as accurate as memory allowed, while in the later, far more crafted version (as Maria Malikova shows, continued below), Nabokov is deliberately inaccurate, misleading the Anglophone so that he can incorporate Kharlamov’s work into the Blok-Gypsy-Tamara portrait he constructs there for the first time. Kharlamov painted many saccharine “heads” (golovki, a genre emphasizing typification over personal portraiture), including the head of a Mordvinian girl with loose black curls which would have been closer to the visual reality Nabokov emphasizes, but would have added a second-rate sentimentality to the portrait he himself was painting. The framing of Tamara’s verbal portrait with the synthesis of Blok’s poetry and gypsy songs and images suggests that at age sixteen Nabokov saw a parallel between Liusia and Del’mas. A comparison of their photographs suggests even a physical resemblance between the two.

In Speak, Memory Nabokov emphasizes Tamara’s dark-haired allure: “A drop of Tatar or Circassian blood might have accounted for the slight slant of her merry dark eye and the duskiness of her blooming cheek” (230); she considers her “rich brown hair” “unruly”
In Mary, Nabokov gives Liusia’s physical attributes to Mary, whose “Tatar eye” (on one occasion called flashing) is mentioned three times, and her dark complexion once, suggesting that these features were an essential part of her attraction for him." Tamara/Liusia is exotic—from a family of lower social standing than the Nabokovs, and untamable—“When I used to tell her we would marry…she would quietly call me a fool” (231). Her blithe trespassing on and defacing of the Nabokov property, her ready laughter and snorts of amusement, as well as her apparent unfaithfulness (her blush on encountering the fellow with the riding crop [232-3]) are in keeping with Carmen’s wild persona.

The Carmen of Bizet’s opera makes visual Mérimée’s vivacious dark-haired provocative woman whose flamboyant gypsy nature is the embodiment of eros freed from all social conventions, particularly of marriage. Delmas’ rendition had a powerful effect on Blok when he first saw her in the role at the Petersburg Theater of Musical Drama in October 1913. He was so taken that he saw the opera three times, and finally wrote to her on February 14, 1914:

I inevitably fall in love with you each time you appear on the stage. It is impossible not to fall in love with you, looking at you, your head, your face, your figure…I am not a boy, I know that hellish music of love which makes your whole being groan and from which there is no escape. I think you too well know this, since you know Carmen so well…

In a second letter, Blok asks Delmas to have her picture taken out of costume, with no make up, in rehearsal dress with a black “dickey” (nagrudnik), and specifies the scenes to photograph, predominantly with Don Jose, from her throwing him the flower to immediately before he stabs her “(teeth visible and smile).” Blok is enamoured of Delmas-as-Carmen and of the tragic tale, from her seduction of Don Jose to her death at his hands. With his third letter (March 26, 1914) Blok sent “Musagetes” containing his three poems to her; they met on March 28, 1914 and began an intense affair. His diaries mention their frequent meetings on the street from June 1917 to her visits in spring 1921.

Nabokov would not have known all this in 1916, but he would have known enough from
Blok’s poems alone to have seen a parallel at the time, which he developed as later knowledge elaborated it for him--Blok’s diaries and notebooks to which Nabokov refers in Speak, Memory were first published in 1928 and 1930, respectively. In the poems, the portrait of Liusia, quite different from the one in Speak, Memory excerpted above, contains a thematic relationship to Blok’s cycle in addition to the “many banal, beginner’s echoes of Blok” in “lexicon, metrics, semantics, syntax, and intonation” typical of Nabokov’s poetry of the second half of the 1910s to the first half of the 1920s mentioned by Dolinin.¹³ Nabokov at sixteen, seeing himself as a budding poet, addresses his beloved using the clichés of love poetry of the period--pearly teeth, fiery eyes, kisses, arms, sunsets, heaven, paradise, stars, moon and roses; but his poems are further related to Blok’s by Carmen’s role as betrayer and Liusia’s evidently more lighthearted feelings for her poet.

Nabokov

Love at first sight
Как будто слыша вздох, я тихо обернулся
встретил в первый раз (6)
И...я нашел ее, желанную мою...
Она близка была; я молча улыбнулся
И руки протянул, и понял, что люблю...(470)

Betrayal
Я долго жду тебя; рождается страданье,
А голос пел: Ценою жизни
Мне помнится обман изведанных годов (478)
Ты мне заплатишь за любовь!

Все та же сказка—любовь, измена...(476)

Ты не могла понять, что неизменным вечно
И песня Ваших нежных плеч
Хранить в душе твой взор я должен и могу.
Уже до ужаса знакома.
Девиз твоей любви—мгновенно и беспечно;
И сердцу суждено беречь,
Моей любви девиз—всю жизнь тебя одну. (482)
Как память об иной
навек...(6)

Blok

Love at first sight
Так я Вас встретил в первый раз (6)
И...я нашел ее, желанную мою...
Она близка была; я молча улыбнулся
И руки протянул, и понял, что люблю...(470)

Betrayal
А голос пел: Ценою жизни
Мне помнится обман изведанных годов (478)
Ты мне заплатишь за любовь!

Все та же сказка—любовь, измена...(476)

И песня Ваших нежных плеч
Хранить в душе твой взор я должен и могу.
Уже до ужаса знакома.
Девиз твоей любви—мгновенно и беспечно;
И сердцу суждено беречь,
Моей любви девиз—всю жизнь тебя одну. (482)
Как память об иной
навек...(6)
Eyes
Ты—в белой шляпе с огнем в очах— О страшный час, когда она, 
Ко мне прижалась; и все видели (466) Читая по руке Цунига,

В глаза Хозе метнула взгляди! Насмешкой зацветились очи, (4)

Зачем, моя радость, печальны (9) В очах, где грусть измен
Твои дорогие глаза? (467)

Curls, roses
Вокруг твоих кудрей алеет И золото кудрей червонно-красным
Большой венок прекрасных роз. (483) И голос–рокотом забытых бурь. (3)

Вздыхаю мед последних аль роз (476) Розы — страшен мне цвет этих роз,
Это — рыжая ночь твоих кос?
Это — музыка тайных измен?
Это — сердце в плену у Кармен?

(7)

Figure
Твой белый стан за розовой полянкой Он средь бушующих созвучий
Исчез, мелькнул и скрылся навсегда (475) Глядит на стан ее певучий (5)

Да, всё равно мне будет сниться
Твой стан, твой огневой! (9)

Pearly smile
До боли ясна жемчужная улыбка (486–7) Насмешкой засветились очи,

Блеснул зубов жемчужный ряд,

(4)

Arms
Я хочу, чтобы вечно глядела луна Да, в хищной силе рук прекрасных,
На твои обнаженные руки (486) В очах, где грусть измен,

Весь бред моих страстей
Моих ночей, Кармен! (9)

Kisses
Ты—вдремоте любви, я целую глаза И целую тебя я в плеча. (7)
Я люблю целовать тебя так горячо
В эту ямочку около шейки...

Ты уснула опять я целую глаза (486)

Not forgotten

И я прочту в глазах и в яркости ланит,
Да, я томлюсь надеждой сладкой,
Что все-таки сбылись несбыточные грезы,
Что ты, в чужой стране,
Что все-таки тобой я не был позабыт. (473) Что ты, когда-нибудь,
украдкой Помыслишь обо мне...(9)

Nabokov makes no allusion to Blok’s Carmen cycle, or to gypsies, but the parallels, especially the
distant syntactic one above, suggest that he had specifically Blok’s Carmen poems in mind and,
possibly partly consciously, used some of their intonations to render his feelings of betrayal by
Liusia.

Maria Malikova has shown how Conclusive Evidence and Drugie Berega omit chapter 11
of Speak, Memory, with its emblematic pavilion, the circle of index references, and the fuller
portrait of Tamara. Like the “Poems,” “[t]he Russian text of the ‘Tamara’ chapter is much closer
to the perception of Nabokov the sixteen year-old youth, that is, romantic and idealistic, in
distinction to Speak, Memory…The erotic subtext is absent in the early versions.”  ma-xiii Malikova
shows that Nabokov’s construction of Tamara in Speak, Memory becomes more artifice, less
memoir. But in distinction to Conclusive Evidence and Drugie Berega, the early poetry does
emphasize the erotic aspect of the affair (bared arms, neck kisses, love doze).

Nabokov, then, having intentionally omitted the (obviously crucial) erotic element in the
account of his first love from the early versions of his memoir, restored it in the 1960s,
embellishing it with the Carmen theme and its Blokian associations. This is the kind of treatment
of Blok’s poetry that Alexander Dolinin describes in “Nabokov and Blok.” As he says of the
Blokian bogs that conclude the scene of Nabokov’s last meeting with Tamara on the train,
Nabokov creates an intersection of the “‘thematic design’ of the fate of the young poet with the
life and poetry of Blok,” possibly altering the chronology to do so (331). Dolinin suggests that
Nabokov overcame his “anxiety of [Blok’s] influence” once he made the transition from poetry
to prose in the late 1920s, and was able to assess his own relationship to Blok’s poetry (335). That
creative distance allowed Nabokov to begin to associate Blok’s poetry with, for example, Ganin’s
parting from Mary in the prose treatment of his own affair with Shulgina, and he continues to
incorporate it into *Lolita* and *Ada*.xxiv Dolinin identifies “Incognita “ (*Neznakomka*) as one of
Nabokov’s recurring references to Blok; the Carmen cycle should be added to the system he
describes, because, while the references to the figure of Carmen in Nabokov’s novels require only
a knowledge of Mérimée’s Carmen to be intelligible for, say, Humbert’s purposes, recognizing
Blok’s Carmen as part of Nabokov’s depiction of his own struggle to overcome nostalgia for his
erotic past adds more than an autobiographical dimension. It allows us to understand Humbert’s
pedophilia as a perverse variation of Nabokov’s fixation on his first love and the world associated
with her.

The Liusia-Carmen theme is about sexual obsession, and in his mature works, Nabokov
connects it particularly to Lolita and Ada. Carmen has no place in *The Gift*, where Nabokov
connects the growth of the poet’s art to Zina, and substitutes his second love for his first,xxv or in
*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which treats the transition to an Anglophone frame of
reference. Nabokov links Sebastian’s last love, Nina, not to Blok and Carmen but to the Persian
princess tale and its reappearance in an American story.xxvi Nabokov juxtaposes *femme fatale*
figures (in varying degrees of parodic garb) to an idealized, desexualized helpmeet of the
Zina/Clare type who clearly refer to Nabokov’s wife, Vera Evseevna Slonim. xxvii

Dominique Desanti quotes Marc Slonim’ characterization of Nabokov’s relationship with Irina: “Irina
Guadanini est un violent, un aveuglant entrainement sensual. Vera et plus proche de Vladimir
Nabokov qu’aucun etre humain ne l’a jamais été.”xxviii Nabokov removes Liusia entirely from *The
Gift*, and while Zina is associated with Blok’s “Nezkankomka” Carmen is entirely absent.xxix As
Sebastian Knight’s letter writer puts it in *Lost Property*, implicitly referring to Clare, “you were
the pure love…this other passion is but a comedy of the flesh” (111).

Dolinin has written of the two kinds of love Nabokov had for Russian and English:

…Nabokov’s relations with the two languages were, in fact, as different as different kinds of love, eros, on the one hand, and agape and philia, on the other. His love for the English language was, no doubt, erotic and self-serving; as his own metaphor goes, he carried on a love affair with it. For Nabokov, English, a semi-foreign language, remained like a beautiful, desired other whom the suitor tries to charm, to seduce, to possess but can never fully attain…

As for Russian, the [sic] exile taught Nabokov to thrive within it, to draw sustenance from it, and to love it selflessly [as one loves only one’s parents or God (inserted from the Russian version of this passage—we Americans can take it--PM)]…for the life-giving and soul-giving gifts.

Nabokov met Vera in Berlin in 1923; as Dolinin says, Shulgina remains “the personification of the real object of nostalgia, the sign of irretrievable loss,…the poeticization of the image of Home preserved in his memory…” Thus Humbert’s love for Lolita is a parodic version of Nabokov’s nostalgia as well as of the Freudian traumatic experience: Humbert is a pedophile, acting out Nabokov’s obsession with his Annabel Lee, a frozen-in-time and tome Carmencita, an obsession that can never be assuaged, even with the palliative of art.

Maria Malikova shows how Nabokov “selects motifs that have been poetically formulated by Blok” and “tunes them with ‘Pushkin’s tuning fork’” to relieve the personal anguish of his father’s death. He does the same in Lolita in his treatment of the loss of Liusia, underscoring the association of Mérimee’s (and invisibly Blok’s) “Carmen” with Pushkin’s “The Gypsies” when Humbert imagines Lolita plotting with Mary Lore “in Basque and Zemfiran. Humbert is metaphorically what Nabokov
would be if he allowed his nostalgic love of Liusia to determine his present life. Dolinin makes this point about (an ambiguous in Russian) Annabel “Lee/Leigh” in speaking about Ganin and Mary:

Ganin grieves not so much over the loss of his beloved…(a motif parodied in the story of the childhood love of the hero of Lolita for the beautiful Annabel Leigh)” as over the loss of place and time—for the condition of ‘trembling happiness’ he had in his youth. xxxiv

Humbert’s longing is for a composite of girl (Leigh) and poem (Lee), as Nabokov’s is for Liusia and all that is associated with Blok.xxxv

Finally, we return to VN’s infatuation in Speak, Memory with ten year-old Colette—why is she the first character explicitly related to Carmen? The Biarritz setting motivates the Basque association and the idea of running off to the mountains (in the direction of Spain). Nabokov and Colette do run away, to the cinema, where they watch a “highly exciting bullfight at San Sebastian” (151) (Spanish Basque territory just over the French border), before being apprehended by his tutor. Nabokov’s earliest erotic experiences, thwarted as Humbert’s were with Annabel, are with the French ten year-old. Nabokov connects his beach love for Colette to Tamara, with whom he “bathed in a fairy tale cove” (240), presumably more successfully than Humbert and Annabel, who escape to the beach and are interrupted in their attempt to make love “in the violet shadow of some red rocks forming a kind of cave” (13). Humbert’s Annabel Leigh, then, is a composite of Speak, Memory’s Tamara and Colette. Colette is associated with Carmen in the first version of the memoir Conclusive Evidence as a stand-in for the absent erotic material connected with Tamara/Carmen, while representing a childhood passion.

Nabokov’s pseudonym for Liusia, Tamara, seems to refer to Lermontov’s poem, “The Demon,” signaling a romantic naïveté. The name has a more personal, erotic association for
Nabokov. In a letter to his Tenishev school friend, Samuel Rozov, he recalls their schoolmate, Evgenii Oks, and his “attractive sister Tamara, who enjoyed [illegible]. Oks was the first to tell me about the existence of ‘houses where beautiful women give themselves to whoever wants them.’” The editor, Yury Leving, compares this with a passage from Mary: “[A classmate] told me that there are in the world beautiful women who allow themselves to be undressed for money.” Through this connection the name “Tamara” gains another erotic association with Nabokov’s high school days, so that Liusia’s pseudonym in Speak, Memory represents a compendium of the young Nabokov’s first sexual impressions, constructing a kind of romanticized version of puberty whose poignancy is heightened by the loss of Vyra, Petersburg, Blok.

Nabokov connects a jasmine motif to the Carmen cluster. In Speak, Memory Nabokov associates Tamara with jasmine bushes: walking his bicycle up the final stage of his trip from the Rozhestveno highway to the portico of his uncle’s house where Tamara awaits him, Nabokov passes through “a footpath among dripping jasmine bushes” (233). He connects jasmine to Blok in the passage mentioned above describing their final meeting on the train:

It can be proved, I think, by published records that Alexander Blok was even then noting in his diary the very peat smoke I saw…There was a later period in my life when I might have found this relevant to my last glimpse of Tamara as she turned on the steps to look back at me before descending into the jasmine-scented, cricket-mad dusk of a small station; but today no alien marginalia can dim the purity of the pain (241).

Nabokov associated jasmine with hidden orchids—the female and the male conjoined—in his poem from the 1916 collection about the flowers that surround the lovers’ encounter (along with suggestive diereses):

Зовут влюбленного гвоздики;
Зовут вербены мотыльков;
Играют солнечные блики
That the flower appears in Mérimée’s “Carmen” may of course be mere coincidence: “in her hair she had a large bunch of jasmine, the petals of which at night exude an intoxicating scent” (19). But Nabokov’s nightly passages through a thicket of dripping jasmine on his way to his trysts with Liusia would have enhanced the scent’s memorable erotic associations by yet another connection to Carmen.

This is the theme of Ada: Van Veen’s grotesque erotic fixation on his first passion for the twelve year-old Ada, distorted by the passage of time. Like Pushkin’s muse who has become Tatyana by ‘the great/fourth stanza of your chapter eight,” Ada is the next incarnation of Nabokov’s love for Liusia, but unlike Tatyana, the love has not evolved, and is only partially requited. In this version too, Nabokov connects early adolescent sexuality to the Carmen theme and the jasmine motif; both occur only in Book I, chapters 5, 8, 20, 34, and are associated with Ada and Blanche. (Blanche is a version of Speak, Memory’s Polenka, the first girl to cause Nabokov’s wet dreams: Van “deliberately endeavored to prolong the glow of its incognito by dwelling on the last vestiges of jasmine and tears in a silly dream” (123).The “smithy smothered in jasmine” in Blanche’s home village, Torfyanka (35), is related to Polenka’s having married a blacksmith (SM, 210). Polenka isolates the purely erotic element in Speak, Memory as Blanche does in Ada). Ada with her botanical and entomological zeal would have been a more appropriate
match than Liusia for Nabokov. Ada is an intellectually improved version of Liusia, though just as faithless; she is the next stage in the evolution of VV’s continual recasting of his early erotic experience, distinguishing and reconfiguring elements of lust and enchantment from increasingly distant points in time, from which the lust looks ever more grotesque.

Van Veen’s erotic excesses increase throughout his life as he tries to assuage his longing for his first love. That this is the next variation on Liusia and the Carmen theme is signaled by references to the gitanilla, Dolores. On the Admiral Tobakov Van watches the film, “Don Juan’s Last Fling,” in which Ada plays the gypsy:

She was absolutely perfect, and strange, and poignantly familiar. By some stroke of art, by some enchantment of chance, the few brief scenes she was given formed a perfect compendium of her 1884 and 1888 and 1892 looks.

The gitanilla bends her head over the live table of Leporello’s servile back to trace on a scrap of parchment a rough map of the way to the castle. Her neck shows white through her long black hair separated by the motion of her shoulder. It is no longer another man’s Dolores, but a little girl twisting an aquarelle brush in the paint of Van’s blood, and Donna Anna’s castle is now a bog flower. (489)

Don Juan’s Last Fling merges Mozart’s Don Giovanni (Leporello, Donna Anna) with Bizet’s Carmen (the Gypsy girl) and Lolita (Dolores), each with Pushkinian echoes. Blok’s “Carmen” is present but would be invisible, if not for Nabokov’s associating Lucette with “Neznakomka.”xxxviii

The film of Ada playing the Gypsy Dolores collapses time for Van; for Nabokov, the composite Carmen-Lolita-Ada is an evolving image of Liusia. great! Nabokov’s memory is transmuted into successive creations, but Van is stuck on memories of erotic bliss, so that everything which should give rise to poetry results in harlotry and death:

[Lucette] would build for him, in the park, several pavilions to house his successive harems, they would gradually turn, one after the other, into homes for aged ladies, and then into mausoleums. (477)
The pavilion as site of first love and first poem mythologized in *Speak, Memory* houses mortal women, indistinguishable by Van, for whom they become simply useless by aging, dying. Liusia is fixed in the memoir, costumed, invisibly to the reader, as a *gitanilla* in Nabokov’s memory, giving her the only immortality that he and she can share.

Understanding *Lolita* and *Ada* as Nabokov’s road not taken underscores his struggle against not only obsessive nostalgia, but his regret at the loss of eros (last fling) even as he employs his longing for the intensity of his first love as a source of artistic inspiration. Dolinin writes that *Mary* “condenses all the nostalgic recollections that fed the lyricism of his youth and at the same time outgrows them.” xxxx This obtains in the aesthetic sphere. Cincinnatus’ words express the personal experience: “[Y]ou express it, you excise it, and it grows back worse than before.” xl

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1 Ernest Dowson, “Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Rego Cynarae,” *An Anthology of World Poetry*, ed. Mark van Doren (New York: Halcyon House, 1928), 1264-65. Dowson was friends with William Butler Yeats and Aubrey Beardsley, revered Poe, Baudelaire and Verlaine, and influenced Yeats and Rupert Brooke (who claimed to have committed most of Dowson’s work to memory).


This calls into doubt Appel’s suggestion that the Carmen references in *Lolita* are solely to Mérimée’s story (Alfred Appel, Jr., *The Annotated Lolita*, 358, note 45/3; all references to *Lolita* are to this edition). Dmitri Nabokov affirms Nabokov’s love of the opera: “…he was very fond, for example, of *Bohème* and *Carmen*, where the composer respected the librettist and the librettist respected the novelist, the sum being touching and expressive music,” NABOKV-L, October 27, 2006.


Ibid, III, 577.


xiii Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson have shown how important visual representation was for Nabokov’s verbal portraits in Nabokov and the Art of Painting (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).

xiv Dmitri Nabokov agreed that there is a resemblance when shown a photograph of Del’mas, although he changed his mind after closely inspecting photographs of Shulgina (e-mail correspondence of 9/7/06 and 9/10/06). Ambiguous, but significant.


xvi Liubov’ Aleksandrovna Del’mas (1884-1969). Her maiden name was Tishinskaia, her married name Andreeva and her stage name Del’mas. A mezzo soprano, she studied at the Petersburg conservatory (1898-1905).


xviii A. Blok, Ss, VIII, 435; letter of March 11, 1914.


xxi The poems are quoted from V. V. Nabokov, Stikhotvoreniia, ed. M. E. Malikova, Peterburg, 2002 and denoted by page numbers from that edition.

xxii Blok’s poems are cited from SS, III, 227-39, and denoted by position in the cycle.


Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, Vintage. “I met her in June 1916. She was twenty-three. Her husband…was at the front.” (149).


Clare and Zina say the same words to their writer mates, referring to paired languages: “You can’t say it so in English” (*RLSK* 83); “…I’m not sure you can say it like that in Russian” (*Gift*, 204).


was the first to discuss the Carmen and Pushkin connections; see 144 n.85, citing L. Kogan, “Pushkin v perevodakh Mérimée,” Vremennik Pushkinskoi komissii 4-5 (Moscow-Leningrad, 1939), 331-56. Nabokov recognized that the librettists of Bizet’s opera, Meilhac and Halévy, took lines from Pushkin (Commentary to Eugene Onegin, III, 156). See David A. Lowe, 19th Century Music, vol. 20, no. 1, pp. 72-76, Summer 1996, 74, note 19.


Vladimir Alexandrov, op. cit., 217, sees in Humbert’s love for Lo a parodic treatment of Blok’s themes of the “beautiful lady” or “the stranger.”


Ibid, 27.

Alexandr Dolinin, “Nabokov i Blok,” 332.
