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Vladimir Nabokov on the Telephone
Handout for Telepoetics Conference

1. “Letter, carried of Shaun, son of Hek, written on Shem, brother of Shaun, uttered for Alp, mother of Shem, for Hek, father of Shaun. Initialled. Gee. Gone. 29 Hardware Saint. Lendet till Laonum. Baile-Atha-Cliath. 31 Jan. 1132 A.D. Here Commereces Enville. Tried Apposite House. 14 Fitzgibbets. Loco. Dangerous. Tax 9d. B.L. Guineys, esqueer. L.B. Not known at 1132 a. 12 Norse Richmond. Nave unlodgeable.” &c
(James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 420)

2. “that sequence of small bar-shaped hoots was like the long vertical row of superimposed I’s in an index by first lines to a verse anthology”; in ‘the back of the telephone book on which we used to jot down names and figures, our hands mixed, slanting and curving in opposite directions’
(Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, p. 33; pp. 36 - 7.)

3. “‘I rang you up at your hotel from a roadside booth of pure crystal still tear-stained after a tremendous thunderstorm’”
(Vladimir Nabokov, *Ada*)

4. Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Telegraph Poles’

On the uniform poles on the side of the path
There are porcelain bells and six
Humming strings.

Messages passes after message
- the rumble of countless voices, anxious
and mournful, passes from end to end.

And you – on the pale strip of the road,
you, sunburned wanderer, barefooted,
slow your step and freeze with the wind,
attending to the song swimming through.

The melancholy of the plains hums, hums,
and each pole casts a long shadow,
and the path is long, and you are alone.

(Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Telegraphnyie stol’y’. Written 11th May 1920; first published in *The Empyrean Path* (1923), and republished in the 1979 *Stikhi*, p. 30; and in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda* 1: 531-2; translation Thomas Karshan and Bryan Karetnyk).

5. Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Telephone’

Alone, in the dark, behind strong walls,
 I called you, though there were between us,
 cities, and vivid dreams of rivers,
 steppes upon steppes, misty forest upon forest.
 — Are we to be parted for long?
 I asked, in inarticulate longing.
 — Yes, — you vaguely replied — yes,
 forever, my beloved, forever.
 — I heard you: forests and rivers,
 cities smouldering in the sun
 And a regular expanse of fields
 — Your winged lamentation overcame everything, everything, —
 And between us along straight roads,
 Those monstrous lilies-of-the-valley wailed.

(Vladimir Nabokov, 'Telefon', translation by Thomas Karshan and Bryan Karetnyk. In Vladimir Nabokov Archive, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Letters from Vladimir Nabokov to his mother, Elena I. Nabokov. Folder 2. The poem, dated 23 May 1921, is on the back of a letter dated 24 May 1921.)

6. 'the "content" of any medium is always another medium'
 (Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (1964; Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 8)

7. it is 'as if in your soul there's a place prepared in advance for my every thought.' (31st December 1923)

'I cannot write a word without hearing how you will pronounce it. [...] I can't tell you anything in words - and when I do it on the phone then it comes out completely wrong. Because with you one needs to talk wonderfully, the way we talk with people long gone. [...] And you know, it turns out that it wasn't Edison at all who thought up the telephone but some other American, a quiet little man whose name no one remembers. It serves him right. [...] I am thinking with aversion about how - practically - I will mail this letter tomorrow - and yet I am ready to give you all of my blood.' (8th November 1923)

(*Letters to Véra*, translated and edited by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 14; pp. 7 – 8)

8. Vladimir Nabokov, 'On the Telephone'

A rustle steals up on the black membrane.
 Through the quiet ringing I hear,
 as though in an inverted telescope,
 your distant laughter miniaturised.

'Well, are you happy?' — 'Yes, very...' — 'The reason?'
 — 'This is the last time we'll speak:
 I'm to die...' For a moment a bee-like fog
 divides us with its humming.

'Are you listening? I've stood up from my chair,

in my hand I'm clutching a heavy...'
 — 'Stop! Stop, don't joke...' — '... I'm placing the mouth...'
 Your distant laughter flows.

'What's got into you! Stop! It's even...'
 But again your words slip by:
 'I'm pulling, pulling, pull ...'
 'Stop!' A deafening clap.

This tormenting dream always comes to me
 while I wait, as it quietly rings,
 for your rustling voice to appear
 like a shadow from the depths of time.

(Vladimir Nabokov, 'Po telefonu', translation by Thomas Karshan and Bryan Karetnyk. In Vladimir Nabokov Archive, Berg Collection, New York Public Library. Stikhi 1923 [Album 8])

9. 'the message may be swamped by its own energy.' (Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1950; London: Free Association Books, 1989), p. 25.)