THE NABOKOVIAN

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THE NABOKOVIAN

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News

by Stephen Jan Parker

Regarding the Centennial

— From Gavriel Shapiro, Cornell University: "The Cornell Nabokov Festival is slated for 10-13 September 1998. It celebrates 50 years since Nabokov's arrival at Cornell (1948) and his upcoming centenary. The focal point of the Festival will be a scholarly conference, by invitation only, in which the leading Nabokovians will take part. In addition, the following events are planned: 1. Display of first editions, archival materials, and other Nabokov memorabilia; 2. Concert of music, with the participation of Dmitri Nabokov; 3) Exhibit of Kathryn Jacobi's etchings for *Invitation to a Beheading*; 4) Exhibit of Nabokov's butterfly collection; 5) Presentation of movies based on Nabokov's works."

— From Jane Grayson, University of London, comes advance notice of an International Nabokov Centennial Conference, London and Cambridge England, 7-10 July 1999. "In early July 1999, the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London will host an international conference to commemorate Nabokov's centenary. Trinity College, Cambridge (Nabokov's old university college) will also participate in the event and provide a venue for one of the days. Papers will be by invitation, but attendance will be open to all interested parties."

— Salient quotations from a letter received by D. Barton Johnson from the manager of the U.S. Postal Service's Stamp Services: "Thank you for your recent letter expressing support for the issuance of a commemorative stamp honoring Vladimir Nabokov in 1999. Unfortunately, we cannot honor your request. The Citizens'

Stamp Advisory Committee did consider the nomination of Vladimir Nabokov, but it was not recommended for issuance....As an alternative, a pictorial cancellation may be used to recognize special events....You may apply to the postmaster of the city where your event will take place at least ten weeks prior to your event."

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The *Lolita* Remake

In 1990 Carolco Pictures bought the film rights to *Lolita* from the Nabokov estate. Mario Kassar, chairman of Carolco, then engaged Adrian Lyne as director. Lyne's credits include *Foxes*, *Flashdance*, *9 1/2 Weeks*, *Fatal Attraction*, and *Indecent Proposal*. When Carolco later went bankrupt, Chargeurs productions, a French conglomerate, agreed to produce the film. Three screenwriters — James Dearden, Harold Pinter, and David Mamet — were engaged successively to write the screenplay. Their efforts deemed unacceptable, Stephen Schiff, a writer at the *New Yorker*, was then hired and his screenplay was adopted in 1995.

The new film version of *Lolita*, which thus far has reputedly cost between $40-65 million, went into production on September 5, 1995 in Wilmington, North Carolina with the following cast:

- Lolita is portrayed by Dominique Swain, a 15-year-old Los Angeles high school sophomore who is making her acting debut. She was selected after a nationwide search that attracted more than 2,000 hopefuls.

- Jeremy Irons is cast in the role of Humbert Humbert. His credits include *Brideshead Revisited*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Dead Ringers*, *Kafka*, and *Reversal of Fortune*, for which he won an Oscar as best actor in 1991.

- The role of Charlotte Haze is played by Melanie Griffith. Among her credits are *Pacific Heights*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *Body Double*, *Nobody's Fool*, and *Working Girl* for which she was nominated for an Oscar.

- Frank Langella is cast as Clare Quilty. His many film credits include *Cutthroat Island*, *Body of Evidence*, *1492: Conquest of Paradise* and most recently, *Eddie*.

Publicity surrounding the production from early autumn through mid-winter concerned the producers' rumored inability to obtain a distributor because of the film's subject matter and treatment. It was said that (1) given the subject and Lyne's past screen treatments of sexuality, the film would surely be unable to gain the needed "R" rating required for major distribution, and (2) that all major distributors had refused to take on the film because they were terrified of being associated with a sex film dealing with pedophilia.

In regard to (1), on February 13, 1997 Reuters reported that the film was given an "R" rating with no difficulty: "MPAA [Motion Picture Association of America] sources said the film didn't contain anything graphic enough to earn a stiffer rating and the picture passed through on the first screening." In regard to (2), Lyne steadily maintained that distributors had not refused the film for the simple reason that the film was not shown to anyone because it was not finished. Final cutting and editing was not completed until February, and one presumes that only recently has it been offered to distributors. Trade sources report that negotiations are now in progress.

Lolita once again had become news. Feature stories appeared in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vogue*, *Entertainment Today*, *Esquire*. The popular press has been revisiting the novel, the first *Lolita* scandals, and any scent of new

scandals. In conjunction with the New York Mercantile Library's Nabokov festival, Jeremy Irons read a selection from the novel, and then several weeks later there was a celebrity-filled marathon public reading of the entire work. Almost simulaneously, the Library of America released a new, authoritative text of the novel, and then Random House released Jeremy Irons' nearly 12-hour audiobooks rendition of the complete *Lolita*. The internet is buzzing with Nabokovphiles arguing the merits of Kubrick's 1962 film, the merits of Nabokov's screenplay, the likely merits of a new film (sight unseen), the need for a remake, the desirability of a remake.

One suspects that the film will be released, by either a major or minor distributor; that it will be shown in the USA and abroad; that it will engender much commentary and some controversy; that editorials will be written; that *Lolita* book sales will rise; that lovers of the novel will be unhappy with the film; that the film will eventually be available on video cassette and find its way to the collections of all Nabokovphiles; and that several decades from now yet another film rendition of *Lolita* will be made by another director with another cast based on another screenplay. Such is the case with many great novels.

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CONFERENCE NEWS

AATSEEL National Conference, Washington DC, December 27-30, 1996: "Vladimir Nabokov Society Panel." Anna Brodsky, Chair; Sunny Otake, Secretary. "The Absurd, the Mechanical, and the Aesthetic in *Invitation to a Beheading* and Camus' *L'etranger*," Dominica Radulescu; "State Freedom—Nabokov and the Russian Tradition," Stephen Blackwell; "Nabokov's Allusion: Dividedness and Polysemy," Gavriel Shapiro; "Homosexuality and Cleanliness in *The Gift*," Anna Brodsky;

"Adolescent Fantasy—*Lolita* and Duchamp's *Etant donne*," Marina Temkina; Discussant, D. Barton Johnson.

MLA National Conference, Washington DC, December 26-30, 1996: Two panels were sponsored by the International Nabokov Society. (1) "Family/Antifamily in Nabokov's Work," Erik Hyman presiding: "The Mirrored Self: Incestuous Fictions in Nabokov's *Ada*," Claudia Rattazzi Papka; "Resisting Narratives: Incest Narrative Structure in *Lolita*," Jen Shelton; "Hazel and Haze, L.: Family and Antifamily," Charles Nicol. (2) "Open Session," Ellen Pifer presiding: "'Vile Scripts': Enframing Games in Nabokov's 'The Assistant Producer'," Christian Moraru; "Dancing on One's Hands: Metaphoric Gymnastics in *Ada*," Robert Alpert; "The Rapture of Endless Approximation: Nabokov and the Art of the Scholar," Brian D. Walter; "Vladimir Nabokov and Captain Mayne Reid's *Headless Horseman*," D. Barton Johnson.

International Symposium: German and Russian Cultural Juxtaposition, Columbia, Missouri, February 27-March 1, 1997: "Nabokov and Goethe: Emulation, Parody, and Reconciliation," Omry Ronen; "Trans-National Authorship on the German-Slavic Border: Nietzsche and Nabokov as Examples," John Burt Foster, Jr.

Northeast Modern Language Association, April 1997: "Camera obscura—Cinematic Techniques in the Novels of Vladimir Nabokov," Samuel Schuman.

Conference on the Occasion of Nabokov's Birthday, St. Petersburg, Russia, April 23, 1997. Introductory remarks, Andrei Bitov. "Nabokov's Library," L. Klimenko; "West European Paintings from the Nabokov Family Collection," P. Myagkov; "Ambivalence as Characteristic of Nabokov's Poetics," A. Luxemburg; "Casott, Nabokov, and Bulgakov," N. Teletova; "Pushkin's 'Keys' to 'The Tragedy of Gospodin Morn'," V. Stark; "Nabokov's Onegin Pastiche," A. Stepanov; "Some Peculiarities of Nabokov's

Gogol Interpretation," N. Ivanova; "*Lolita* and 'Stavrogin's Confession'," L. Tselkova; "Nabokov and Chekhov," V. Shadursky; *Palisandria* by Sasha Sokolov-*Lolita* Inverted: To the Problem of Post-Modernistic Parody," T. Belova; "Nabokov's Cambridge Autograph," V. Kalinina; "Nabokov's Audition Coloree," S. Slivinskaya; "Butterflies in Nabokov's Life and Art," V. Dmitrieva; "*Dva Puti* Collection of Poems by V. Nabokov and A. Balashov," E. Belodubrovsky; "The Discovery of 'A charming four-move chess problem of an American master': Tetrology in Nabokov's *The Gift*," E. Leizerov.

Slavic Forum Graduate Student Literature Conference, University of Chicago, April 25-26, 1997. Dostoevsky and Nabokov panel: "Invitation to Reconsider Nabokov's Art," Natasha Pakhomova; "'Windows Giving Upon a Contiguous World': Architectural Imagery in *The Gift* and *Invitation to a Beheading*," Gwen Walker.

MLA National Conference, Toronto, Canada, December 26-30, 1997. There will be two Nabokov panels sponsored by the International Nabokov Society: (1) "*Lolita* in Context. Issues, Controversies, English and Russian Texts, Film Adaptations, Intertextuality," chaired by Ellen Pifer. (2) "Open Session," chaired by D. Barton Johnson.

AATSEEL National Conference, Toronto, Canada, December 27-30, 1997. There will be one open panel sponsored by the International Nabokov Society, chaired by Sunny Otake. There will be another panel, not sponsored by the Society, "Vladimir Nabokov and Intertextuality," chaired by Nikita Nankov.

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The annual business meeting of the International Nabokov Society took place at the MLA meetings in December. D. Barton Johnson presided. A number of reports were given.

1. Stephen Parker, Secretary/Treasurer and Editor of *The Nabokovian* reported that there are 210 individual and 90 institutional subscribers/members. Of the former, about 20 are complimentary subscriptions. Total membership income for the 1995 calendar year was $4,571; total expenditures, $3,910. [Note: the carry-over balance and the slight profit in 1995 allowed The Nabokovian to purchase $1,000 worth of *Nabokov Studies* #1 and #2 for resale. The remaining copies were purchased by Zoran Kuzmanovich, editor of *Nabokov Studies* and D. Barton Johnson. The Society now owns all copies of the journal which no longer has any connection with the former publisher, Charles Schlacks.] The report was read by D. Barton Johnson.

2. Zoran Kuzmanovich reported on the status of *Nabokov Studies*. There are 72 paid subscribers and seven institutional ones. [Money at hand from three-year subscribers is $3,478 as of 17 April 1997.] Printing costs are running well over earlier estimates and subscriptions, particularly institutional ones, are far lower than anticipated. Davidson's subsidy and money on hand will insure the publication of the 1997 issues but may fall short for 1998. Several steps have been taken. The editor plans to mail out to libraries 200 subscription forms offering volumes 1-3 at a special rate of $100 (total) when they subscribe to the 1997 and 1998 volumes. If 40 libraries subscribe and individual subscriptions continue to rise, the journal should be able to pay its printing expenses. If there are not sufficient new subscriptions, the editor has agreed with the Dean to contribute $1,500 out of his own travel/research funds to insure the printing of the 1997 volumes. IF *NABOKOV STUDIES* IS TO SURVIVE, IT IS ABSOLUTELY IMPERATIVE THAT SOCIETY MEMBERS REQUEST THEIR UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES TO SUBSCRIBE—AND SUBSCRIBE THEMSELVES.

3. Jeff Edmunds, editor of *Zembla*, the Nabokov web site

[http://www.libraries.psu.edu/iasweb/nabokov/nsintro.htm] reported that there were some 47,500 visits to the site over a one-year span. The site includes a running VN bibliography, selected articles, translations, a *Lolita* section, and VN miscellany. The report was given by D. Barton Johnson

4. D. Barton Johnson, editor of NABOKV-L, noted that the subscriber's list is now 425, with subscribers from places as remote as Outer Mongolia, Thailand, Iceland, and South Korea. The retrievable archives for the list now go back to February 1993 and can be machine searched. To get NABOKV-L, send the message SUBSCRIBE NABOKV-L to LISTSERV@UCSBVM.UCSB.EDU.

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Odds and Ends

— Dmitri Nabokov and William F. Buckley, Jr. starred in a benefit performance for the Mercantile Library of New York of "Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya, The Friendship and the Feud" at the Century Center Theatre, New York City on May 19. The play is a dramatic dialogue adapted by Terry Quinn from the letters of Edmund Wilson and Vladimir Nabokov.

— The full text of *Lolita* is now available in an 8 cassette, 11 1/2 hour audiobooks edition recently released by Random House Audiobooks (201 East 50th Street, New York, NY 10022). This writer strongly concurs with the laudatory first reviews of Jeremy Irons' impressive one-man performance. "Nabokov said *Lolita* was the record of his love affair with the English language; Irons makes it a menage a trois," writes a *Vogue* reviewer. The Chicago Tribune exclaims, "Irons' inspired reading is not to be missed." This is the first audio rendition of the entire novel. Earlier recordings presented Vladimir Nabokov reading Quilty's death scene, and James Mason, the first

screen incarnation of Humbert Humbert, reading selections from the novel.

— Thomas Urban writes: "I am collecting materials concerning the position of the Soviet authorities towards VN. I would appreciate hearing from anyone who may have memories or documents concerning censorship (Glavlit), discussions and decisions inside the Writers' Union of the USSR, the government run book publishers, the cultural department of the Central Committee, the KGB, the Customs Service, clandestine readings, etc." Contact him at Suddeutsche Zeitung, Sendlinger Str. 8, D-80331 Munich; Fax 49-89-2183-207.

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Please Note: Issues #17(f86), #27(f91), #28(s92), #32(s94), and #33(f94) are now entirely out-of-print.

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The Enchanter
A Series of Public Programs at The Mercantile Library of New York

by Harold Augenbraum
Director, The Mercantile Library of New York

> My little helper at the magic lantern, insert that slide and let the coloured beam project my name or any such like phantom in Slavic characters upon the screen. The other way, the other way. I thank you.
>
> - from "An Evening of Russian Poetry" by Vladimir Nabokov

The trepidation with which one undertakes a series of public programs on the work and life of Vladimir Nabokov is underscored by the above epigraph. His reputation was that of not suffering fools gladly, and of gladly pointing out their deficiencies with great relish. Twenty years after his death he remains a daunting presence, perhaps no moreso than to those who know him solely through his art, the biographies about him, and the many and much-milled rumors.

In the Fall of last year, at the Center for World Literature of The Mercantile Library of New York, we decided to enter the public discourse on Nabokov with a series of public lectures. As we darted into the breech, there, awaiting us, were fellow Nabokovians and a groundswell of interest. Acclaimed biographer Stacy Schiff (*Saint-Exupery*) had begun a life of Vera. The Library of America was about to declare Nabokov an American, by including him in its pantheon. The filmmaker Adrian Lyne had convinced no less a sophisticated personage than Jeremy Irons - our generation's James Mason - to star in a "remake" of *Lolita* (though scuttlebut says that his first choice had been Hugh Grant), simul-

taneously confronting the heavy brow of Nabokov and the thick beard of Stanley Kubrick. Producer Gregory Mosher purchased the film rights to *Laughter in the Dark*.

When it became known that the Center was embarking on this journey, telephone calls arrived from reporters at *U.S. News &World Report*, *Newsweek*, and *Vogue* (only the first of these mentioned our series, but not by name, calling it 'a gathering of intellectuals in New York'). We got in touch with Hollywood publicists...and they returned our calls. Suddenly, four decades after the publication of his notorious *Lolita*, three-and-a-half after a film of the same name, Nabokov was hot again.

Though Vladimir Nabokov's work has remained "in-print" since his death, his inclusion in the 'canon' has often been a matter of debate, since he remains a presence difficult to categorize. Studied on campus in departments of Slavic languages, papers included in the Slavic Division of The New York Public Library, he nevertheless also appears in syllabi in English and American literature courses, a writer whose life and work are almost evenly divided by the Russian and American years (Brian Boyd's useful demarcations, which focus as much on language as on sensibility). The general public knows him as the author of *Lolita*, the book with which he altered the English language and "without which", one critic told me as I picked his brain, "he would probably have died in obscurity, little read and less understood."

I would like to propose several reasons for a revival in interest in Nabokov's work, including its general high quality and accessibility, in no specific order, without giving weight to one over another. The "Lolita" remake is a major factor, but one also has to credit the general interest a major author's work generates a decade or two after his death. Time and again American critics have waited a score of years or so (see Fitzgerald, see Faulkner) to begin a reassessment. In Nabokov's case, however, several factors in his own posthumous life lent themselves to new research.

First is the death of Véra Nabokov in 1991. Véra was passionately protective of her husband's reputation; upon her death, the path to scholarly development of Nabokoviana was made clearer. The Nabokovs' unfortunate experiences with Andrew Field must have left her gun-shy. By the time she herself had reached an advanced age, she must also have felt a need to select an authorized biographer whom she believed would not repeat that fiasco. She found him in Brian Boyd, but only after she had spent years with Boyd sorting out her husband's papers. Boyd's masterwork, in turn, contributed to the Nabokov revival. Published in hardcover in 1990 and 1991 (the year of Vera's death) and followed soon thereafter by softcovers for the general public, Boyd's access to and intimacy with the Nabokov papers, sanctioned by Véra, allowed the Common Reader a much broader view of the man and trenchant but readable opinions on his work.

A second factor is the maturing of Dmitri Nabokov. Dmitri, as sole heir and executor of the estate, has passed the age of sixty. Both of his careers (race car driver and opera singer) are those of a young man. He now has the time and the will to put the reputation and the estate in order. Intimately involved in his father's work, as translator and interpreter, his own public legacy depends, to a great extent, on the literary life of his family.

A third factor might be the integration of the emigré artistic production into the contemporary Russian cultural sphere. For example, in addition to the much-publicized inviting of Russian emigré artists to return to Russia, governments in the cities and provinces have welcomed the emigrés with promises of personal and professional reintegration. Nabokov's ancestral town house in Petersburg has been turned over to Dmitri Nabokov to develop as a Nabokov museum and the country house is being rebuilt according to the original plans (it was damaged by fire several years ago). Younger scholars now have access to archives in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and are assisting in this revaluation by researching literary affinities (Bunin and Nabokov, for example, in the work of Maxim Shrayer). Russian emigré society, made up of displaced individuals defined by exile, produced some extraordinary art, though at the time it was recognized mainly by a small cadre of fellow emigrés. Until recently, in particular when the publication of Nina Berberova's *The Tattered Cloak* brought Americans into that rarefied world, a great deal of work by Russian emigré authors in Europe was little known in the United States, except to scholars and a few film buffs.

With this in mind, under grants from the New York Council for the Humanities and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney Conner, The Mercantile Library's Center for World Literature undertook to present a series of programs that would examine various aspects of Nabokov and his work.

Originally conceived as six lectures, this generous funding allowed us to add the reading of two Nabokov plays at the Library and of excerpts from Nabokov's *The Enchanter* at a Barnes & Noble superstore, eight programs in all, in addition to the Library of America's marathon reading of *Lolita*, which took place at Soho's Drawing Center on November 23rd and was timed to celebrate the publication of three volumes of Nabokov's fiction in English.

On October 9, Maxim Shrayer, Assistant Professor of Russian at Boston College, kicked off the series with *Nabokov's Jewish Themes*. Shrayer focused on the emigré years and interwove the novels with Nabokov's life with a Jewish wife. The following week, Playwrights' Preview Productions, a resident organization at the Library, produced script-in-hand readings of "The Pole" and "The Man from the U.S.S.R.". The latter turned out to be surprisingly current: With minor changes, it could have been set in contemporary Miami.

On October 23rd, Ross Wetzsteon, an editor at *The Village Voice* and a former student of Nabokov at Cornell, and Beverly Jane Loo, former editor at Nabokov's publisher McGraw-Hill and a close family friend during

Nabokov's final years, presented *Memories of Nabokov*. Loo traveled to New York from Charlottesville, Virginia, where she is Director of the Center on Publishing and Communications at the University of Virginia.

The highlight of the series took place during the following week, when Dmitri flew in from his home in Montreux to present *The Lolita Legacy: Life with Nabokov's Art* (a complete version of the talk was printed in the Fall, 1996 issue of *The Nabokovian*) and two days later appeared with actor Michael Tolan to read excerpts from *The Enchanter* at Manhattan's newest Barnes & Noble superstore across from Lincoln Center. Nabokov was able to combine thoughtfulness, intimacy and scholarship, and thoroughly charmed both audiences.

On November 6th, Princeton University's Professor of English Michael Wood delivered a thought-provoking talk on *The American Nabokov*, followed by biographer Stacy Schiff's insightful and entertaining stories of Vladimir and Véra Nabokov. A witty discussion of Nabokov's wife's role in his life and work, from her grading of his students' papers at Cornell to her final years as the executrix of his estate, Schiff's talk was reprinted in *The New Yorker*'s February 10, 1997 issue. Finally, to cap off the series, Brian Boyd, arriving the day before from New Zealand to take part in this series and to celebrate the publication of his edition of Nabokov for The Library of America, spoke on Nabokov's humor.

The Library's Nabokov programming did not end there, however. On May 19, 1997 at the Century Theater in Manhattan, The Mercantile Library of New York presented Dmitri Nabokov as his father and William F. Buckley, Jr. as Edmund Wilson in "Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Friendship and The Feud", an adaptation of the Wilson-Nabokov letters by playwright Terry Quinn. Commissioned as part of the Library's centennial celebration of the life and work of Edmund Wilson, "The Last of the Public Intellectuals: Edmund Wilson and the American Century", the play was first presented at The Mercantile Library on April 19, 1995. Quinn has also

been awarded permission from the Nabokov and Wilson estates to develop the play for regional theatre and campus productions.

This was the most publicized series the Library has ever presented. Listings appeared in *The New York Press* (three times), *The Village Voice* (twice), and *Time Out New York* (a listing and paid advertising). A picture and listing for the Barnes & Noble reading was published in *Free Time New York*. A two-page article and picture on the series appeared in *Humanities* magazine, a publication of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Average attendance at the Library's programs exceeded 100, though the two programs featuring Dmitri Nabokov topped 160. The Director of Public Relations at the Barnes & Noble superstore excitedly told me that Dmitri had outdrawn every speaker at that two-year-old store with the exception of actress Kathleen Turner.

Following are excerpts from four talks presented during the series.

* * *

Death, Immortality, and Nabokov's Jewish Theme

by Maxim D. Shrayer

In his novels and short stories—both of the Russian and the American periods—Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) created a series of Jewish characters. He also populated his fictions with non-Jewish characters who exemplify the entire spectrum of Russian attitudes towards the Jews, from Antisemitism to Philosemitism. Nabokov's Jewish theme evolved in his Russian fictions to reach a crescendo in his third American novel, *Pnin* (1957). The genesis of Nabokov's Jewish theme may be linked with his upbringing in the family of V. D. Nabokov, a leading advocate of the Jewish cause, but chiefly to his marriage in 1925 to Véra Slonim, a lifelong inspiration for

Nabokov's creativity. Following his marriage to Véra Slonim, opposition to anti-Semitism became a leitmotif of Nabokov's life. In the Russian émigré communities in Europe and America, much more so than in Russia, Nabokov got to know a wide variety of Jewish characters and types, from unbending *Geschäftmacher* to penniless philosophers. Notable Jewish authors and intellectuals with whom Nabokov came in contact in Europe and America included M. H. Abrams, Iulii Aikhenval'd, Mark Aldanov, Sasha Chërnyi, Il'ia Fondaminskii, Harry Levin, Anna Prismanova, Mark Vishniak.

Nabokov's Jewish characters play a distinct part in his short stories and novels. Faced with peripeties of exile and catastrophes of the modern age, Nabokov's Jewish characters confront death and intuit the nature of its protean phenomenon. In their linkages and contacts with death, Jewish characters ponder postmortem realms and model immortality. The deaths of Jewish friends in the Holocaust, as well as encounters with Antisemitism, compel non-Jewish characters to modify their ethical and metaphysical views.

The novel *Dar* (*The Gift*, 1937-38) offers an in-depth investigation of major themes in Jewish history and thought, and does so by linking central characters with a search for immortality and manifestations of the transcendent. Let us examine three interconnected Jewish issues in the novel: 1. conversion of Jews to Christianity; 2. models of postmortem survival and communication with the deceased; 3. the impact of the protagonist's half-Jewish Muse.

One of the main characters, Alexander Chernyshevski, goes insane after his son's suicide in Weimar Berlin. Chernyshevski's Jewish grandfather is said to have been baptized by a Russian Orthodox priest, the father of a prominent revolutionary of the 1860s, Nikolai G. Chernyshevski. As a part of the conversion, Chernyshevski the priest also lent the new convert his last name. Multiple ironies emanate from the presence of two Chernyshevskis in the novel. One Chernyshevski is the

subject of the protagonist's novel, *The Gift*, the other the subject of the *biographie romancée* which the protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, composes and inserts within his novel.

For Alexander Chernyshevski, much like for his wife and many more Jews who were converted to Christianity, their acquired religion amounted to an illusory ticket to the mainstream Gentile society. Culturally a Russian, and spiritually an agnostic, the exile Chernyshevski hovers between his ancestral Judaic past and his assimilated and displaced present. One of the most remarkable paradoxes of the Jewish convert Chernyshevski is that despite a seemingly materialist and secularist orientation of his ideas, he becomes the author's agent of exploring the phenomenology of death. The loss of a son plunges his father into a void of despair and mental illness. At first, Chernyshevski believes that his son exists in some parallel world. Following a relatively pacific stage of communicating with his son's spectral images, Chernyshevski enters a new stage of his illness, a stage that the protagonist describes as a "caricatured vulgarization of that complex, transparent and still noble though half-insane state of mind in which Chernyshevski has so recently communicated with his lost son." During the second stage of his derangement, Chernyshevski rejects a possibility of otherworldly encounters with his son. Temporarily released from a mental institution, Chernyshevski, "seemed [...] quite lively again; [...] but [his son's] ghost no longer sat in the corner." It is not until his third, final stage of madness from grief, that Chernyshevski considers and rejects a sophisticated model of postmortem survival.

Full of deliberate ambiguities, the episode of Godunov-Cherdyntsev's last visit with Chernyshevski opens with a pseudo-philosophical discussion of death and immortality: "When the French thinker Delalande was asked at somebody's funeral why he did not uncover himself [...], he replied: 'I am waiting for death to do it first [...]'." The French philosopher Delalande is, of course,

Nabokov's mystification, an authorial disguise allowing Nabokov to expound upon his views of death and the other world. Remarkably, after a page or so of Delalande's discourse, the narrator's (or authorial) philosophizing voice flows into the voice of Alexander Chernyshevski, who contemplates his own imminent death. So gradual is the transmogrification of the former voice into the latter that the reader is not quite sure where one ends and the other starts. Nor is the reader quite clear whether Delalande's discourse is an intended product of the authorial consciousness or a figment of Chernyshevski's inflamed imagination. At some point, Alexander Chernyshevski—a secularized Christian of Jewish extraction—unequivocally interrupts the flow of Delalande's discourse by voicing skepticism about Christian notions of the afterlife:

> If the poor in spirit enter the heavenly kingdom I can imagine how gay it is there" [cf. Christ's Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs" from Matthew 5: 3]. I have seen enough of them on earth.

Now that he is dying, Chernyshevski confesses, his previous belief in ghosts appears to him as something entirely earthly and base. In a state of clairvoyant delirium, Chernyshevski records his own futility before the mystery of death:

> Of course I am dying. [...] Funny that I have thought of death all my life, and if I have lived, have lived only in the margin of a book I have never been able to read.

The paradox of Chernyshevski's delirious vision lies in a recognition that "in dying [he gets] father away from [Yasha], when the opposite should have been true—even nearer and nearer...." Chernyshevski worries that after his death, there will be no one left to communicate with Yasha's spectral presence. On the eve of his death, in a

"moment of lucidity," Chernyshevski utters: "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards."

The reader learns that Chernyshevski "had turned out at the last minute to be a [Lutheran]." Perhaps Chernyshevski's religious affiliation with Protestantism, and not Russian Orthodoxy as expected, highlights his *pro forma* Christianity, his conversion in a minor key. During the funeral service for Chernyshevski, Godunov-Cherdyntsev finds vexing his own inability to "imagine some kind of extension of [Chernyshevski] beyond the corner of life [...]." Trying to focus on Chernyshevski's death, he notices that "he was unable to keep his thoughts on the image of the man who had just been reduced to ashes [...]." In fact, the passage describing Chernyshevski's funeral foregrounds an opposition between the beauty and tangibility of this world, on the one hand, and the uncertainty and opaqueness on the beyond, on the other. As Godunov-Cherdyntsev ponders Chernyshevski's disappearance, "at the same time he [cannot help] noticing through the window of a cleaning and pressing shop near the Orthodox church, a worker with devilish energy and an excess of steam, as if in hell, torturing a pair of trousers." Such a cinematic superimposition of two spaces, an Orthodox church and a cleaning shop, evokes a traditional Christian model of an anthropomorphic hell where the wicked undergo torment. In their own ways, both the deceased Chernyshevski and Godunov-Cherdyntsev have rejected such models. From a "troubled and obscured state of mind which was incomprehensible to him," the protagonist passes "with a kind of relief" to a new cosmic awareness:

> as if the responsibility for his soul belonged not to him but to someone who knew what it all meant—he felt that all this skein of random thoughts, like everything else as well—[...]—was but a reverse side of a magnificent fabric [iznanka velikolepnoi tkani], on the front of which there gradually formed and became alive images invisible to him.

The protagonist, an aspiring author and thinker, needs the spiritual travails of the teetering Jewish convert Chernyshevski to make sense of his own existence—of death, love and the transcendent being. In fact, Godunov-Cherdyntsev's account of his encounters with Chernyshevski intertwines with the narrative of his falling in love with Zina Mertz. Incidentally, right after the funeral service, Godunov-Cherdyntsev finds himself "on a bench where once or twice at night he had sat with Zina." Godunov-Cherdyntsev's novel might not have been undertaken had it not been for Zina, his half-Jewish Muse. The entire novel become, in the words of its protagonist and presumed author, "a kind of declaration of love." In the novel, Zina the Muse not only inspires the writing and serves as the first reader and judge, but also symbolizes the kind of Russia, both idealized and feminized, that Nabokov strove to preserve in exile. In this immortal and nebulous Russia, half-Slavic and half-Jewish, the Jewish issue is harmoniously resoled—Nabokov's perfect if unattainable dream.

* * *

The novel *Pnin* (1957) is the pinnacle of Nabokov's Jewish theme. In *Pnin*, Nabokov reactivates two central themes of *The Gift*, namely the theme of postmortem survival of consciousness and the theme of love between an ethnic Russian man and a Jewish woman. While in *The Gift* the two lovers are joined by benevolent fate that oversees their lives, in *Pnin* Nabokov pursues a tragic scenario. Timofey Pnin and his beloved Mira Belochkin are separated by the Russian Revolution and Civil War; subsequently, Mira perishes in a Nazi concentration camp.

Pnin recalls not only the themes of *The Gift*, but also their structural execution. In particular, in both novels the reader faces philosophical digressions on the subject of death and the afterlife, both linked to the Jewish theme. As Professor Pnin sits on a park bench, trying to

cope with an acute heartache that synchronizes layers of his memories, Nabokov's narrator offers the well-known following meditation ("My friend wondered, and I wonder, too"). The meditation offers grim prospects of the ego's postmortem survival. Much of the novel is thus devoted to the protagonist's elaboration of an equation to justify his own survival in view of Mira Belochkin's martyrdom and death.

Pnin is a canonical Russian *intelligent*. Like Godunov-Cherdyntsev, he comes from a St. Petersburg liberal milieu that made no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles. Throughout the novel, Pnin thinks of the afterlife and continues to encounter both Jewish characters and anti-Semitism. Pnin's ex-wife Liza, a immoral and manipulative woman, tells him about her new male friend: "His father was a dreamer, had a floating casino [...], but was ruined by some Jewish gangsters." Uncomfortable with traditional notions of Heaven and Hell, and repelled by Liza's complacent anti-Semitism, Pnin thinks to himself: "If people are reunited in Heaven (I don't believe it, but suppose), then how shall I stop [Liza's soul] from creeping upon me, over me." At that very moment, when Pnin seems "on the verge of a simple solution of the universe," a squirrel interrupts his thoughts. The squirrel, possibly a spectral presence of Mira Belochkin ("Belochkin" derives from the Russian feminine noun "belochka" = "little squirrel"), communicates an "urgent request," and Pnin understands her perfectly. The Jewish squirrel surfaces in the novel to remind Pnin of his moral responsibility and to direct his increasingly unorthodox metaphysical quest.

The Jewish theme in the novel culminates in the episode in the country where Pnin socializes with a colorful group of fellow-expatriates that includes Jewish couples. At one point, he is forced to sit down on a bench by an approaching "frightening cardiac sensation, which he had experienced several times throughout his adult life." At this very point, Pnin is accosted by Roza Shpolyanski, the wife of a Jewish liberal politician of the

1910s: "I don't think we ever met. But you knew well my cousins, Grisha and Mira Belochkin. They constantly spoke of you. He is living in Sweden, I think—and, of course, you have heard of his poor sister's terrible end...." Pnin resists a meeting with the past, but his memory perseveres. Thereafter follows a lengthy recollection, both tortuous and idyllic, of Pnin's first love, in part reminiscent of Nabokov's accounts of his own first love in *Speak, Memory*.

Why does Pnin resist remembering Mira? What does it mean that "in order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira"? Pnin's modus vivendi, his prohibition against remembering his dead beloved, is a direct consequence of the Holocaust. How can Pnin, a moral and compassionate human being, continue living in a post-Holocaust void by denying himself the right to remember its victims: "if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible"? Could it be that Nabokov's Russian protagonist has formulated a profound if grave truth that a human mind seeks to come to terms even with such incomprehensible disasters as the loss of six million lives?

Nabokov's account of Pnin's intimations of Mira's death belongs to the finest pages of literature about the Holocaust:

> One had to forget—because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in one's mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away

> by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood.

Just as many Jewish thinkers after World War Two, Timofey Pnin is skeptical of the existence and omnipotence of a beneficent God in view of the Holocaust. How can suffering of the righteous be explained and furthermore justified? What was the collective postmortem destiny of the Holocaust martyrs following their physical annihilation by the Nazis? What were the individual destinies of the loved ones the Jews lost in gas chambers? How can he, Timofey Pnin, go on living after what was permitted to happen during the Holocaust? How can he hope for personal immortality when six million innocent people have disappeared, and no one seems to be able to explain their disappearance in either metaphysical or ethical terms?

And yet, however spasmodic, memories of Mira's death help Pnin intuit a model of postmortem survival that validates his experience in a post-Holocaust world:

> Pnin slowly walked under the solemn pines. The sky was dying. He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuos session, attended to the destinies of the quick.

Pnin's awareness amounts to an understanding, prominent in Judaism, that life in the other world is only significant insofar as it affects those living in this world.

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* * *

The American Nabokov

by Michael Wood

Humbert Humbert arrives in America because his uncle has left him 'an annual income of a few thousand dollars on condition I came to live in the States and showed some interest in his business'. But more specifically, more magically, more metaphorically, Humbert comes to America because the weather in a picture breaks into his supposedly three-dimensional life. 'These burst', Humbert says of the thunder clouds in an American print in a shop in the rue Bonaparte, 'a splendid, flamboyant green, red, golden and inky blue, ancient American estampe - a locomotive with a gigantic smokestack, great baroque lamps and a tremendous cowcatcher, hauling its mauve coaches through the stormy prairie night...'. The ostensible subject here is Humbert's life with his wife Valeria from 1935 to 1939, where they lived, what their apartment was like, what they did with their time, where they ate. The print in the window seems to be just a detail, perhaps expressing symbolically a longing for the spacious America and is golden west, but still just a detail. But then Nabokov makes the apparently incidental illustration into the very scene of his novel, pulls America out of his stylistic hat like a magician, and suggests very delicately that it is to *this* America that he is taking Humbert, and us: a place in a print, a mythological America; a place he is in the process of inventing, as he says, the way he had already invented another world ('It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced with the task of inventing America').

Ada, as Nabokov said, 'is mostly set in a dream America'; but that America is also a dream Russia, and an alternative world, a history to set beside our history rather than one which repeats it. Nabokov is no longer trying to be an American writer, as he said he was in *Lolita*; he is using the liberties of having become one. In

Lolita, *Pnin*, and *Pale Fire*, though, which we may think of as his American trilogy, we watch him becoming an American writer.

Lolita, of course, is full of America, and Americana, from Charlotte Haze's house to Quilty's manor, and from genteel New England to the raw Rockies. We hear the train from the print ('And sometimes trains would cry in the monstrously hot and humid night with heartrending and ominous plangency, mingling power and hysteria in one desperate scream'), and Humbert describes himself as 'putting the geography of the United States into motion'. He praises the 'wide-eyed, unsung, innocent surrender' of the American wilds, but he also remembers their discomforts. The innocence (and the surrender) is what Humbert wants to find there, what he wanted to find in Lolita, a European's dream of America just as it is a pedophile's dream of a child. Both America and children are different from the dream, no doubt.

> We had been everywhere. We had really seen nothing. And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night - every night, every night - the moment I feigned sleep.

This sounds like a confession of guilt, and in a way it is. Humbert perhaps really doesn't enjoy Lolita's sobs, and perhaps something other than the noise is keeping him awake. But we can't miss the pleasure of the defilement here. American has to be innocent in order for Humbert to revel in the enormity of his crime: the conquistador repents and enjoys his conquest again in the process. In this, as in much else, Humbert is seen to be deluded. America was not so innocent, or so easy to defile, and Humbert has left almost no trace on it all except through this memoir. He has stepped into a print, and barely

managed to learn that there is another America.

America for Pnin mostly means freedom, often comically inflected, but always real. The American way, for instance, can be a matter of sloppy, scarlet socks, and of showing a leg. The conservative European Pnin is a creature of the past:

> All this underwent a change in the heady atmosphere of the New World. Nowadays, at fifty-two, he was crazy about sunbathing, wore sports shirts and slacks, and when crossing his legs would carefully, deliberately, brazenly display a tremendous stretch of bare shin.

The end of the novel sees Pnin in his little car, spurting up a shining road 'where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen'. This is not comic, but it is ironic - there are no simple escapes in Nabokov, and anyone who gets away expresses at best the hope of getting away. Still, we are offered a picture of freedom, and for reasons too complicated to lay out here, it is clear that this is not only the American freedom of a person who used to be Russian, it is the freedom of an individual person from a range of imprisoning caricatures, including the author's own. Pnin, that is, looks as if he could cease to be 'Pnin', the comic character, and become finally one of the composite, patchwork figures that Americans, in their land of immigrants, are allowed to be and are supposed to be.

This can't really be the Pnin we glimpse in *Pale Fire*; or if it is, he is now thoroughly imprisoned in yet another person's narrative. But then *Pale Fire* is already moving towards the 'dream America' of *Ada*, is far more capriciously grounded in its American than either *Pnin* or *Lolita* is. America here is above all a place to die in: more than once, as John Shade does. An extraordinary concentration of fears gathers round these lines from the centre of Shade's poem:

> Nor can one help the exile, the old man
> Dying in a motel, with the loud fan
> Revolving in the torrid prairie night
> And, from the outside, bits of colored light
> Reaching his bed like dark hands from the past
> Offering gems; and death is coming fast.

The draft form of this passage, which our narrator preserves for us, has:

> Nor can one help the exile caught by death
> In a chance inn exposed to the hot breath
> Of this America, this humid night"
> Through slatted blinds the stripes of colored light
> Grope for this bed - magicians from the past
> With philtered gems - and life is ebbing fast.

Perhaps Kinbote prefers the variant because the exile is not (necessarily) an old man there. Certainly he associates the motel and the chance inn with the place in Utana where he is staying, where he is writing this commentary. Kinbote, who has so far found Shade's poem insufficiently dedicated to himself and his story, now discovers the poem is intimately about him, the exile in America, the man in the motel. Is he dying? Nabokov says Kinbote commits suicide immediately after finishing his commentary. We can argue about this, but there can be no doubt that death is on Kinbote's mind throughout the book, for all kinds of reasons, and that America is its home, even for foreign assassins. Soon after this note Kinbote turns, first, to his thoughts on Sybil Shade's translations into French of Donne's 'Death, Be Not Proud', with its famous line about kings and desperate men; and second, and more extensively, to the completion of his portrait as an incompetent hired assassin.

In Donne's poem death itself will die, defeated by the resurrection. If we do not have faith (Kinbote has), we must recognize that death will win in the end, that death is the ultimate, *competent* assassin, as Kinbote himself

admits in the last words of his book. But many people rush to do death's work, in one way or another, and they are Nabokov's constant target, throughout his career. These criminals are death's usurpers, morally in the wrong for all the obvious reasons, but also for the more subtle reason that no one should do willingly what no one ought to want to do at all.

I don't wish to overmoralize the implicit debate in these American works. But we could, provisionally, think of the three novels as a single text, and of these three heroes and their American ('this America') as a sort of parable. Pnin finds a freedom that Humbert doesn't want and Kinbote couldn't recognize; and he finds it in an America of moral possibility, a new-found land, as Donne said, a place both invented and real. Pnin is attached to his past but no longer hampered by it. It's no accident, I think, that Pnin's past is the harshest of the three pasts on offer. Where Humbert has escaped only from the French Riviera and Kinbote from a place that is probably quite imaginary, lacking all grounding in a sharable history, Pnin, like Nabokov, has fled from 'Leninized Russia'. Pnin has taught himself not to remember this past, has busied himself inventing the present. Humbert and Kinbote, in their different ways, have ransomed the present to a romantic past; to a past they cannot stop inventing.

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* * *

"Véra"

by Stacey Schiff

Vladimir Nabokov was famous at Cornell, where he taught between 1948 and 1959, for a number of reasons. None had anything to do with the literature; few people knew what he had written, and even fewer had read his

work. The fame derived in part from the fact that the professor did not come to class alone. He arrived on campus driven by Mrs. Nabokov, he crossed campus with Mrs. Nabokov, and he occasionally appeared in class on the arm of Mrs. Nabokov, who carried his books. In fact, the man who spoke so often of his own isolation was one of the most accompanied loners of all time; at Cornell, especially, he was in the constant company of his wife. And he was legendary for it.

Mrs. Nabokov sat either in the front row of the lecture hall or, more often, on the dais, to her husband's left. She rarely missed a class, although she did occasionally teach one when Nabokov was sick, and she often proctored exams alone. She had no speaking role when her husband was in the room. Few people knew anything about her. When Nabokov referred to her, he did so slyly, calling her his assistant. The comments went like this: "My assistant will now move the blackboard to the other side of the room," "My assistant will now pass out the blue books," "Perhaps my assistant could find the page for me," "My assistant will now draw an oval faced woman"—this was Emma Bovary—"on the board." And Mrs. Nabokov would do so.

Véra Nabokov was a striking woman, white-haired, and alabaster-skinned, thin and fine-boned. The discrepancy between the hair and the young face was particularly dramatic. She was "mnemogenic," as Nabokov wrote of Clare in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*—"subtly endowed with the gift of being remembered." And that is where the trouble begins. According to the faculty and the students at Cornell, she was luminous, regal, elegance personified, "the most beautiful middle-aged woman I have ever set eyes on"; she was a waif, dowdy, half-starved, the Wicked Witch of the West. To those same students and faculty emeriti went the obvious question: What was Mrs. Nabokov doing in her husband's classroom, lecture after lecture? The answers come prefaced with the reminder that it was Nabokov who termed rumor the poetry of truth:

• Mrs. Nabokov was there to remind us we were in the presence of greatness, and should not abuse that privilege with our inattention.
• Because Nabokov had a heart condition, and she was at hand with a phial of medicine to jump up at a moment's notice.
• That wasn't his wife, that was his mother.
• Because Nabokov was allergic to chalk dust—and because he didn't like his handwriting.
• To shoo away the coeds. [This before the publication of *Lolita*.]
• Because she was his encyclopedia, if ever he forgot anything.
• Because he had no idea what was going to come out of his mouth—and no memory of it after it did—so she had to write it all down so that he would remember what to ask on the exam.
• He was blind, and she was the seeing-eye dog, which explained why they sometimes arrived arm in arm.
• We all knew what she was a ventriloquist.
• She had a gun in her purse, and was there to defend him.

No one was sure who marked the exams, and a few former students admitted that they had made a practice of smiling at Mrs. Nabokov, on the assumption that their geniality would register in their grades. It often was she who graded the blue books, though this does not explain what she was doing in the classroom. She was a mysterious, often intimidating presence in the lecture hall, and she was terrifically exacting, but she was not an ogre of a grader. Ultimately, Nabokov did have teaching assistants, one of whom remembered reading through a hundred and fifty blue books and evaluating them according to a rigorous grading scale. After reading each exam two or three times, he took the pile of blue books to Professor Nabokov's office, hoping finally to chat with the great man. Mrs. Nabokov met him at the door, standing like a sentinel between him and her husband. She took

the blue books, immediately raised all the grades to the eighties, and sent the assistant on his way.

Resentment of Mrs. Nabokov accumulated in equal proportion to the mystique. Who was this "Grey Eagle" in the classroom, the students wondered, while the faculty—very much aware that Nabokov had no Ph.D., no graduate students, no freshmen, and, by the mid-fifties, enviably high enrollments—chafed at the husband-and-wife routine. When Nabokov was being considered for a job elsewhere—and he searched for one within years of arriving at Cornell—an ex-colleague discouraged the idea: "Don't bother hiring him; *she* does all the work.

Nabokov did nothing to check this kind of sniping. He told his students that Ph.D. stood for "Department of Philistines." He left office hours to Véra. And he treated even his own fine performances flippantly. When a friend insisted on attending one of his lectures, Nabokov conceded, "Well alright, if you want to be a masochist about it." His colleagues were jealous of the enrollments, mystified by the butterfly net, astounded by the loyalty of the wife. In this last, they echoed the sentiments of Edmund Wilson, who hated her exam administering and her general devotion. Other writers' wives were asked point-blank, why they could not be more like Véra, who was held up as the gold standard, the International Champion in the Wife-of-Writer Competition, as the novelist Herbert Gold has termed it. It has been said that the Nabokovs refined their marriage into a work of art. More to the point, their marriage had been refined by the art of work. The business correspondence began to snowball after *Lolita*, when Mrs. Nabokov might write four letters a day to a single publisher. "I wrote you today but Vladimir asks me to do so again," she began a note to Putnam's in 1958. Many of these letters are layered like Neapolitan ice cream—in English, French, Russian. The typewriter went everywhere, not for him but for her. There is no evidence of such a thing as a vacation; Dmitri Nabokov observed, "Her attention span for pure amuse-

ment was quite limited." After *Lolita*, the public Nabokov, the voice of Nabokov, was Véra Nabokov's. The student who mentioned ventriloquism was not far off.

When Nabokov wanted information from Stanley Kubrick, he wrote several times. Véra signed one letter: "Vladimir asks me to tell you he will be glad to hear from you provided you don't mind talking to him through me." Nabokov would rarely come to the phone; word went out that he was being held hostage by his wife.

How, insofar as she recognized this, did she feel about it? She apologized to friends about the delays in writing, but rarely allowed apology to veer into complaint. Here she is in 1963, as close to the edge as she appears to have ventured: "I am completely exhausted by Vladimir's letters (I mean those he received and I have to answer) and it is not merely physical work but he also wants me to make all the decisions which I find more time-consuming than the actual typing. Even when Dmitri was very young and I had no help, I still had more leisure than I do now. Mind you, I do not complain, but I do not want you to think that I am merely lax." Usually, she stressed how unqualified she was for her job. Just after the publication of *Lolita*, she wrote to a friend about the impossible pressure of work—especially, she said, because her husband refused to take the least interest in his own business matters. "Besides, I am by no means a Sévigné, and writing ten to fifteen letters in one day leaves me limp." Twenty-five years later, nothing having changed except the workload, she told the same friend that she was a very poor letter writer, had been all her life, yet for the last thirty or forty years had been doing nothing else. A few people had long realized how much she was working. In the early seventies Alfred Apple offered some advice: "You mustn't apologize for being behind in VN's correspondence. There is only one solution. Go on strike for better working conditions and hours. Walk in front of the Montreux Palace with a picket sign, something along the order of 'VN unfair to auxiliary services.' It would certainly have one kind of effect or another."

Of course, she did not do this; the personal letters are instead filled with concerns over how hard Nabokov is working, how difficult it is to prevail upon him to take a rest. And she *was* highly qualified for the job. Her Russian was—in her husband's estimation—"stupendous"; her memory for poetry was exceptional; she was supremely sensitive to a well-turned sentence; she seemed to thrive on living a life outside her own. She was the ideal aide-de-camp in the war against *poshlost*. Like Nabokov, she experienced synesthesia, in their case the ability to see letters and visualize sounds in color. She was such a perfectly logical choice of a wife for Nabokov that the fact that he had married her for anything other than practical reasons was easily overlooked. She shared her husband's eye for detail: in his diary Nabokov frequently cited her poetic, offhand observations. Few saw this side of her especially as she allowed little of her charm onto paper. (During a visit with friends at the Montreux Palace, Nabokov spooned sugar into his coffee but missed the cup. Brightly, Véra informed him, "Darling you have just sweetened your shoe.") More often, people saw the fierce partisan, battling for literary credit in a world of philistines. She did not seem to be aware of the ill will. If she knew that a shy morbidly private, highly principled woman could easily appear prickly, aloof, and intransigent, she did not seem to care. The perfect magician's assistant, she could be sawed in half with no loss of dignity or composure.

Her lawyer was impressed when—in the dimly lit bar of the Pierre Hotel in 1967—she managed to bully her husband's American publisher into making unprecedented concessions. This she did without saying a word. The same lawyer thought her nearly clairvoyant when she insisted on cost-of-living increases in her husband's contracts, increases that proved highly lucrative. The lawyer had not been in Petersburg in the nineteen-tens or Berlin in the twenties; Mrs. Nabokov had. She was accustomed to having the bottom fall out of her world. For Nabokov, this left a mark on the fiction; for his wife

it seems to have shaped a personality. For her, the trapdoors were very real.

Her frustrations were those of living an orderly life in a disorderly world, of producing perfectly set texts in a universe in which typesetters are human. She held people—herself especially—to the standards of her husband's literature, standards to which few of us, and even fewer publishers, rise. She and Dmitri allowed Nabokov what the world had tried to cheat him of: stability, privacy, an atmosphere of Old World taste and original humor, of strong opinion and exquisite, uncorrupted Russian. For many years, he was a national treasure in search of a nation; Véra was a little bit the country in which he lived. Together, they occupied an isolated kingdom of their own, the kind of world out of this world in which Nabokov's characters often find bliss. "Inseparable, self-sufficient, they form a multitude of two," Appel observed of them at Cornell. What could have been more disorienting than that long Ithaca series of rented houses, with rented cats and rented silverware and rented family photographs? No wonder Nabokov treated it all as if it were unreal. It was. He was happy to insist on his isolation, to prove that he had been someone else's pipe dream.

Back, then, briefly, to the Cornell classroom. We shall never know exactly what Mrs. Nabokov was doing there, just as we shall never know which was Flaubert's parrot. (She did own a gun,though there is no evidence of her having carried it to class; Nabokov was generally in robust health, and was not allergic to chalk dust. She was an encyclopedia, but so was he.) A hint of an answer may lie in "Bachmann," the 1924 short story. Bachmann's stellar career at the piano takes off the first day his admirer Mme. Perov sits down, "very straight, smooth-haired," in the front row of one of his concerts. It ends the first night she fails to appear, when, after seating himself at the piano, Bachmann notices the empty seat in the middle of the first row. One Cornellian appeared to appreciate Bachmann's secret in recalling the perfor-

mances of Professor Nabokov. "It was as if he were giving the lectures for her," the student mused. Nabokov claimed that the best audience an artist can imagine "is a room filled with people wearing his own mask." Referring to Mrs. Nabokov, he told an interviewer, "She and I are my best audience, you see. I should say my main audience." For whom else could he have been speaking when one day he listed on the blackboard the names of the five greatest Russian poets? They included someone named Sirin, his own pen name from the Berlin years. "Who is Sirin?" asked an intrepid student. "Ah, Sirin. I shall read from his work," Nabokov answered with a straight face and no further explanation. On a particularly dim Ithaca morning, Nabokov began lecturing in the dark. After a few minutes, Véra got up from her seat in the front row to turn on the amphitheatre lights. As she did, a beatific smile spread across her husband's face. "Ladies and gentlemen," he gestured proudly from the front of the room. "My assistant."

Probably the person who tried to become the most invisible was—to the man on the stage—the most visible. Surely she knew this. No one seems to have dared ask her if she felt oppressed, eclipsed—or, for that matter, central, indispensable, a full creative partner. She was too busy deflecting attention for anyone to get a chance to ask; the more you leave me out, she told one biographer, the closer to the truth you will be. She raised Being Mrs. Nabokov to s science and an art but pretended that such a person had never existed. She clearly felt that she stood not in her husband's shadow but in his light. When she met him, she felt that he was the greatest writer of his generation; to that single truth she held strong for sixty-six years, as if to compensate for all the loss and turmoil, the accidents of history. One Cornell colleague noted in an article that when Mrs. Nabokov was forced to deliver her husband's lectures she modified not a world. In the margin, Mrs. Nabokov chastised him. But of course she had not changed a thing! Had he not understood that each lecture was a work of art?

Condensed from "The Genuis and Mrs. Genuis," first published in *The New Yorker*.

* * *

Nabokov and Humor

Brian Boyd

When I pick up some Nabokov after not reading him for a long stretch, I purr, and chuckle, and wonder: Why does he write so well? Why is he so funny, line for line? Why are his humor and his style so inextricable, when he is not simply a "humorist"? Why is the magic of his work so inseparable from its humor?

In "Ultima Thule" Sineusov writes in a letter to his dead wife: "laughter is some chance little ape of truth astray in our world." (RB 153-54) Within the story, Sineusov's hunch seems to reflect the experience of Falter, a chance *big* ape of truth astray in Sineusov's world. Laughter, Nabokov suggests in this story, is something let loose in our world that bespeaks a much richer but inarticulate truth about things than our little understandings can have within this world. What could that mean?

Nabokov wanted to be funny at every level, and in every way, but he didn't want *just* to be funny, or to be funny in just one way. Insisting as he did that "genuine art mixes categories," he mingled humor and horror, laughter and loss; and he also tried to find as many different *kinds* of humor as possible, some fast, some slow-release, some local, some global, some verbal, some situational, some sympathetic, some barbed.

Humor runs all through his art. Even his chess problems are famous not for their difficulty but for the startling wit of their conception. Each of his novels has a similarly playful novelty of design, from his first, *Mary*, which rests on one simple joke (the heroine who supplies the title and whose arrival the whole book builds towards

doesn't appear after all) to the unfinished *The Original of Laura*, at first called *Dying is Fun*.

Nabokov incorporates humor at every level from the pun, the allusion and the real-life referent to character, situation and structure. Why so much humor? To impress others with his wit? Some read Nabokov's compulsion to be original—which he certainly had—as a compulsion to demonstrate his superiority to others; this kind of reader responds to Nabokov's deliberateness, to his *display* of style, as evidence that he has no substance. I prefer other explanations.

One of his characters refers to "knight moves of the mind." Again and again Nabokov offers us knight moves of the mind because he wants to wean us from the habitual, he wants us to see the surprise everywhere in our world.

In both jokes and images we bring things together in unexpected ways. Now it's possible to do that quietly, and Nabokov can be stealthy indeed; but it's also possible to foreground what is being done, to stress the power of the mind behind an image or a joke. Like the metaphysical poets, Nabokov often displays the power of his own artifice in images often deliberately far-fetched.

He highlights presence of mind and contrasts it with absence of mind, with *poshlost'*: a taking things for granted, an unquestioned acceptance of things, ideas, judgements. Both his imagery and his jokes repeatedly stress the activity of mind, in himself as their inventor, in his audience, and even in what he writes about, whether animate or a playfully personified inanimate.

He stresses the unruly freedom and power of the mind, as opposed to the polished, lock-step parade of poshlost'. He refuses to accept fixed categories, even confounding the distinction between humor and horror in the nightmare of *Bend Sinister*, in the sick fairy-tale of *Lolita*. He rejects common categories, received evaluations and rigid frameworks, he subverts standard notions, and so far from constituting an evasion of the real this has direct implications in the real world. "Curiosity,"

he proposes in *Bend Sinister*, "is insubordination in its purest form" (46); and laughter, he suggests in "Tyrants Destroyed," is the way to defeat tyrants, to stop our minds being colonized or tyrannized.

He claims he has "no moral in tow" (L 316): "satire is a lesson," he says, "parody is a game," and it's parody he admits to. But less because he has nothing to teach, in fact, than because he believes that games get us closer to truth than lessons: that the surprise of the game or the imagination is more revealing than the strict sequence of the lesson or of logic.

For Nabokov a sense of humor is closely related to a capacity for freedom, to the mind's consciousness of its own freedom. His humor, like his style, offers a chance to see and savor the freedom of the mind: to see how easily we leap from invention to invention, how our minds can twist in midair. He wants to suggest that we should respond to our world not passively, but actively, that we should not dully impose standard expectations on things, but notice with surprise and delight when they do not fit what we expect (and that incongruity between expectation and actuality is fundamental to humor). He wants to show us how active, how nimble, how unexpected our minds can be; how we can put our own spin on our world, when we put two things together, a joke, an image, and invent reality, when we become not the passive products of our immediate world, but its active shapers.

And yet at the same time he asks us to respect our world, and let *it* catch *us* by surprise, if we watch closely enough.

Beyond that, Nabokov wants his humor to connect us with the surprises that might lie beyond the understanding of the world our minds trap us within: "Life is a great surprise," he makes John Shade say, "and I do not see why death should not be an even greater one."

But existence beyond time and the self would have to be so surprising that the only way we might know it is *through* surprise; humor, by making us suddenly conscious of the disparity between expectation and outcome,

is one of the most promising signposts to this realm of surprise.

In one light, such comically frustrated glimpses of the beyond as the wrong bedside at the end of *The Real Life of Sebastain Knight* or the fountain/mountain mistake in *Pale Fire* might seem to suggest only a wry metaphysical scepticism, a cruel debunking of desperate human hopes. But the joke is not so much that there's nothing ahead—although Nabokov does leave that as one possibility—as that that all we can know is the surprise, the enormous and absurd distance between mortality and beyond, between whatever we expect and what we might get if our minds *could* escape the prison of time and self. In this sense laughter is indeed a chance ape of truth astray in our world, or as Nabokov wrote to Véra before they were married: "only through laughter do mortals get to heaven." (10.i.24)

Beyond the idea of some almost comically unimaginable state perhaps awaiting us outside the prison of the mortal mind, looms a still deeper possibility: a conscious design behind things.

Nabokov had a sense of some deceptive but playfully benign design behind life, some impish fate or some artistic and gamesome god. Placing the playful surprise of "Find What the Sailor Has Hidden" at the close of the story of his life, he suggests that life itself has a playfulness, that it offers us games of surprise, akin to his and Véra's wanting to maximize Dmitri's shock of amazement; he suggests that there is something behind life that invites our imaginations to discovery as generously as doting parents wanting to foster the imagination of their little boy; he suggests that life invites us to play the game, to notice our world and the possibilities it offers us to see things in surprising and playful ways, and to take that as a token of further surprises ahead ("Authentic humor," as he once wrote, "comes from the angels" [DQ 65]); and he suggests that as a novelist he tries to match life's own game by maximizing the play and the surprises ahead as we read, by inventing his own equivalents for the inex-

haustibility of life's surprise.

Nabokov's humor stands at the opposite pole from that of Beckett, the other great literary humorist of midcentury, of the prepostmodern era (and the absolute antithesis between these two writers whose output overlapped for half a century is the most marvelous proof of the meaninglessness of those period labels). Beckett's astonishing humor springs or seeps or suppurates from a sense of the absurdity of human life, the futility of human hope, and the cracked powers of the human mind in its attempts to cope. He shows the awfulness of things, yet makes it awfully funny. Nabokov's humor springs (and here this *is* the *mot juste*) from his sense of the endless creativity of life, of the pleasures it plants, of the comedy of its mismatching our expectations, from a sense that life's pleasures and play and surprise might suggest surprises behind and beyond life. If Beckett is our great cosmic comic caustic, Nabokov loves and laughs at life even amidst loss.

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ANNOTATIONS & QUERIES

by Gennady Barabtarlo

[Submissions should be forwarded to Gennady Barabtarlo at 451 GCB University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, U.S.A., or by fax at (573) 884-8456, or by e-mail at **gragb@showme.missouri.edu** • Deadlines are April 1 and October 1 respectively for the Spring and Fall issues. • Most notes will be sent, anonymously, to at least one reader for review. • If accepted for publication, the piece may be subjected to slight technical corrections. Editorial interpolations are within brackets. • Authors who desire to read proof ought to state so at the time of submission. • Kindly refrain from footnotes; all citations and remarks should be put within the text, or if necessary, as endnotes. • References to Nabokov's English or Englished works should be made either to the first American (or British) edition or to the Vintage collected series. • All Russian quotations must be transliterated and translated.]

THRILLER SQUARE and THE PLACE DE LA RÉVOLUTION

Numerous studies of *Invitation to a Beheading* have already revealed a rich nexus of allusions underlying the phantasmagoric world of the novel. Cincinnatus's imprisonment and subsequent execution on Thriller Square resound with echoes of multiple precedents and prototypes derived from classical and modern history, mythology, the Bible, Russian and West European literature, theater, art. Outlandish admixtures to the predominantly Russian settings of the novel — foreign names with strong associative overtones(Cincinnatus, Cecilia, Rodrig, Emmie, Diomedon, M'sieur Pierre), broken French phrases of the prison director, references to Italian operas, *Faust* and German choral singing, a Latin name of the contemporary novel, etc. — imply that Nabokov

saw in the predicament of his hero a variation of some universal, metahistorical master-theme detectable in various epochs and cultures, from the execution of Socrates up to atrocities in the contemporary totalitarian states. So it is only natural that *Invitation to a Beheading* among many other historical parallels evokes certain incidents of the French Revolution which produced many, too many real models for Nabokov's nightmarish vision of brutality, bigotry, persecution, imprisonment and capital punishment. Gavriel Shapiro's pioneering "Cincinnatus as *Solus Rex*" (*The Nabokovian*, 33 [1994], 22-24) pinpointed some of them; a few additions are suggested below.

Since Nabokov portrays his hero as an evolving author endowed with the unique, transcending imagination of a genuine artist who keeps on writing until his last hours, the closest prototype of the hero in the annals of the French Revolution would be André Chénier, a very gifted poet executed on the guillotine July 25, 1794 (7 Thermidor, Year Two) when he, like Cincinnatus, was a little over thirty. Before the arrest, André Chénier had published only two poems and therefore died almost unknown and unrecognized; in prison he kept on writing and revising his old drafts until his last hour; brought to the scaffold, according to Chateaubriand, he tapped his forehead and exclaimed: *"Mourir! j'avois quelque chose là"* It was the Muse, comments Chateaubriand, that revealed his talent to him at the very moment of death (Chateaubriand. *Génie du Christianisme.* — oeuvres completes de Chateaubriand, vol. 2 [Paris, 1859], 208, n.2; see also: H. de Latouche. "Sur la vie et les ouvrages d'André Chénier." — *Oeuvres posthumes d'André Chénier*, Paris, 1826, XIX). In a later poem "Kak nad stikhami sily srednei..." (see: *Stikhi*, 285) Nabokov quoted the first line of André Chénier's exquisite "Iambe IV" written an hour before the beheading:

> Comme un dernier rayon, comme un dernier zéphire,

> Anime la fin d'un beau jour,
> Au pied de l'échafaud j'essaie encor ma lyre.

Beside the obvious thematic parallelism there are several oblique allusions to the story of André Chénier's martyrdom in *Invitation to a Beheading*. Thus Cincinnatus's exclamation, "I *have in my head* many projects that were begun and interrupted at various times" (16) as well as his pose (he sits "kneading his forehead with palm of his head" — 32) seems to echo Chénier's scaffold exclamation, while "a sunset ray" (32) and, again, "a reddish evening ray" (64) penetrating the prison cell comes directly from Chénier's deathbed poem. In this case, however, Nabokov's main subtext is found not in Chénier's poetry and biography as such but in Pushkin's long poem "Andrei Shen'e" appended with notes which provide the basic quotations and biographical information. Pushkin who was fond of Chénier depicts him in prison the night before his beheading; in a highly emotional soliloquy the poet curses his tormentors, ponders upon his life and asks his friends to fulfill his last wish *(Ispolnite moe poslednee zhelanie)* — to collect his writings *(sii listy)* and save them *(khranite rukopis', o drugi, dlia sebia!)*. This plea for immortality reverberates in Cinncinatus's impassioned appeal: "Save these jottings *[sokhranite eti listy]*—I do not know whom I ask, but save these jottings—I assure you that such a law exists, look it up, you will see!—let them lie around for a while <...> and I ask you so earnestly—my last wish *[poslednee zhelanie]*—how can you not grant it" (194). If Cincinnatus looking for "at least the theoretical possibility of having a reader" (194) really knows his Pushkin (at least he quotes *Eugene Onegin* and makes Pushkin's doll in the toy workshop), he can find some solace and hope in the posthumous fate of Chénier whose prison "jottings" did survive in a quite miraculous way.

Projecting French Revolution exempla upon the destiny of his persecuted and tormented poet-martyr, Nabokov could also have in mind some other victims of Terror

mentioned in Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution: a History* — the book that he called "admirable" in his commentary to *Eugene Onegin* (3, 343). "An old, scarred carriage" in which Cincinnatus is brought to Thriller Square mimics the Death-Carts bringing the victims of Terror to the Place de la Révolution; Cincinnatus's attempts "to cope with his choking, wrenching, implacable fear" (213) remind one of Camille Desmoulins' moment of weakness on the way to the scaffold: "<...> all is so topsyturvied <...> carnivorous Rabble now howling round. Palpable, and yet incredible; like a madman's dream!" (Carlyle, Thomas. *The French Revolution: a History*. New York, [1934], 678). His desire to "finish writing something" (209) on the verge of beheading parallels Lavoisier's begging "a fortnight more of life, to finish some experiments" (Carlyle, 681) and Madame Roland's "remarkable request" for pen and paper at the foot of the scaffold, "to write the strange thoughts that were rising in her" (Carlyle, 639). Commenting upon the latter "trait," Carlyle exclaims: "It is as a little light-beam, shedding softness, and a kind of sacredness, over all that preceded: so in her too there was an Unnamable; she too was a Daughter of the Infinite." In the same vein Nabokov presents Cincinnatus's similar urge to write his "strange thoughts"; it is also a redeeming and transcending "trait" that connects him to an Unnamable and the Infinite.

In his note Gavriel Shapiro mentions an allusion to the execution of Louis XVI in Nabokov's earlier story "An Affair of Honor" (in which the cowardly hero stamps his foot "as "Louis XVI stamped his when told it was time, Your Majesty, to go to the scaffold") and insightfully connects Cinncinatus's request to be left alone for three minutes before leaving for the scaffold with the King's analogous last wish (see Shapiro, 23). It should be added, though, that the source for both allusions is a vivid description of the episode in Carlyle's book:

> At nine, Santerre says [to Louis XVI] the hour is come. The King begs yet to retire

> for three minutes. At the end of three minutes, Santerre again says the hour is come. Stamping on the ground with his right foot. Louis answers: *"Partons,* Let us go" (Carlyle, 558).

Carlyle's book interspersed with stunning visual details perfectly met Nabokov's requirements to history whose main purpose, in his view, was to feed and sustain imagination. His approach to the study of history was akin to that of Martin, the hero of *Glory*, who "liked what he could imagine clearly, and therefore <...> was fond of Carlyle. <...> He vividly visualized the shivering white day, the simplicity of the black guillotine, and the clumsy tussle on the scaffold, where the executioners roughly handle a bare-shouldered fat man while, in the crowd, a good-natured *citoyen* raises by the elbows a *citoyenne* whose curiosity exceeds her stature" (62).

The regicide scenes imagined by Martin with the help of Carlyle are pertinent for *Invitation to a Beheading* as well because in Nabokov's world any genuine artist like Cincinnatus, Fyodor, Sebastian Knight, John Shade is always royalty, a tzar, a Solus Rex reigning in the kingdom of his own making. "Thou art a tzar, go and live alone" ("Ty tzar' — zhivi odin"), says Pushkin to a model poet in his programmatic poem, and Nabokov has fully absorbed this lesson. "I am a tzar" ("Ia tzar'"), he stated in an early poem ("Ia Indiei nevidimoi vladeiu..." — *Stikhi*, 125). Killing a poet is synonymous to killing a symbolic king, and that is why, for instance, Tiutchev named Dantes, a Frenchman who killed Pushkin at a duel, "a regicide," (see Tiutchev poem on Pushkin's death) equating him with those French *citoyens* who sent Louis XVI to the guillotine. In this sense M'sieur Pierre (another quasi-Frenchman) with his henchmen and admirers are regicides too, and Nabokov underscores Cincinnatus's royal status by making him act as his royal precursor.

What horrified Carlyle the most in the grisly story of the regicide was the banality of its aftermath: the utter

lack of emotional response to the horrible deed, the ability of the ordinary people to immediately forget about it and go on with their lives. "And so, in some half-hour it is done," he describes the Place de la Révolution after the beheading; "and the multitude has all departed. Pastry-cooks. coffee-sellers, milkmen sing out their trivial quotidien cries: the world wags on, as if this were a common day" (Carlyle, 560). He discerns the same public indifference during the Reign of Terror "How many hammermen and squaremen, bakers and brewers, washers and wringers, over this France, must ply their old daily work, let the Government be one of Terror or one of Joy! In this Paris there are Twenty-three Theatres nightly; some count as many as Sixty Places of Dancing" (Carlyle, 636). Nabokov who long before Hannah Arendt became aware of the "banality of evil" or, in his words, "this pail of milk of human kindness with a dead rat at the bottom" (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, 33), made a similar emphasis on the indifference of desensitized multitudes. For the crowd gathered on Thriller Square, the execution of Cincinnatus is just a little diversion, a festive event on a par with some Grand Sale at a department store or some popular show. Before the pageant of "nice and pleasant" beheading "the deputy city director" announces that "the Kifer Distributing Center has received a large selection of ladies' belts" and invites the townspeople to a furniture exhibition and to "the new comic opera *Socrates Must Decrease*" (220-21). The latter detail most probably alludes to Chateaubriand's note in his memoirs concerning the execution of Louis XVI:

> <...> dans le *Moniteur* du 21 janvier 1793, j'ai lu ces paroles au-dessous du récit de l'exécution de Louis XVI:
>
> "Deux heures après l'exécution, rien n'annonçait dans Paris que celui qui naguère était le chef de la nation venait de subir le supplice des criminals." A la suite de ces mots venait cette annonce:

> "*Ambroise*, opéra-comique."
> (Chateaubriand. *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, II. Paris, 1951, 878)

Using the wry observation of Chateaubriand, Nabokov turns the tables upon history: if on the night of January 21, 1793 happy *citoyens* and *citoyennes* of Paris good-heartedly enjoyed the comic opera, their twins in the dormant dreamy-town created by Nabokov's imagination could not make it to the show. Instead of decreasing, the condemned Socrates-cum-king-cum-poet suddenly grew in size and easily stepped out of the shattered Lilliputian world that had imprisoned him. Pushkin's Andrei Shen'e called his executioner Robespierre "a pigmy, a puny pygmy," and Nabokov in the finale of his novel transformed this figure of speech into the figuration of metahistory:

> The last to rush past was a woman in a black shawl, carrying the tiny executioner like a larva in her arms (223).

--Alexander Dolinin, University of Wisconsin-Madison

THE ORIGINS OF A DOUBLE MONSTER

The origins of Nabokov's short story "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster" can be traced to *The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, a satire brought forth by the joint effort of John Arbuthnot, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell, and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford, during their off-and-on activity in the so-called Scriblerus Club in 1713-27.

It is likely that Nabokov found out about the Scriblerians in 1943-48 at Wellesley when he became friends with Wilma and Charles Kerby-Miller. At the time,

Charles Kerby-Miller was working on his monumental edition of *The Memoirs* (83 pages of *The Memoirs* proper, more than 300 pages worth of commentary), which he published in 1950.

The famous "Double Mistress" chapter of *The Memoirs* revolves around the amorous adventures of a pair of Siamese twins, Lindamira and Indamora. Kerby-Miller had painstakingly researched the story of the real twins behind the "Double Mistress" episode, Helena and Judith, exhibited in London in 1708. Nabokov's "Scenes," finished in October 1950, contains details from both the "Double Mistress" chapter and the accompanying commentary by Kerby-Miller.

The boys "anonymous sire" is unknown, but rumor mentions "a Hungarian peddler" (608); "Helena and Judith were born in Szony, in Hungary" (294). Lloyd and Floyd speak three languages: Turkish, English, and their unspecified mother-tongue (612); Helena and Judith "could speak three different languages, as Hungarian or High Dutch, Low Dutch, and French, and were learning English" (296). Lloyd and Floyd are "healthy" and "handsome," with "well formed rubbery arms and legs" (609); Helena and Judith are "very handsome, very well shaped in all parts, and beautiful faces" (296). Nabokov's twins' real names have to be changed to glitzy and mutually-echoing "Lloyd" and "Floyd"; Helena and Judith's names emerge in *The Memoirs* as dramatic sound-alikes "Lindamira" and "Indamora".

Both sets of twins (Nabokov's and the Scriblerians') try to flee their captivity only to be ruthlessly reinstalled in the dubious stardom of the raree-show. The figure of a sensual freakish doctor frames both narratives. "Doctor Frick" strokes "with a dreamy smile of scientific delectation the fleshy cartilaginous band uniting" the brothers (608); Doctor Martinus Scriblerus (a butt of jokes, a freak, a despised "virtuoso") falls in love with Lindamira and briefly possesses the twins.

In 1948, Nabokov embarked on his project of scouring "through masses of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and

nineteenth-century Russian, French, and English Literature in the libraries of Cornell, Harvard, and New York City, ready to seize on the smallest phrase that might recall or elucidate Pushkin" (Boyd 2:237). Massive exposure to eighteenth-century literature, and his predilection for "aberrations in general, both physical and psychological" (cited in Sweeney 1993: 197) accounted for his interest in the eighteenth-century material Kerby-Miller was working with, and provided creative impetus for the "Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster."

--Lisa Zunshine, University of California at Santa Barbara

"I BELIEVE YOU'VE MET PERCY"

As Hugh Person, in *Transparent Things* (p. 45), after a stroll through the town, chances to meet his newer "partner", Armande, he is startled to see that she shares her table there with Julia — who is equally startled to see Hugh, with whom she has earlier had a single, somewhat unsatisfactory sexual episode (pp 34-6). Armande, having difficulty pronouncing the 'H' of Hugh's given name, making it homophonous with 'you', has nicknamed him, based on his surname, "Percy", unbeknownst to Julia. Armande knows that Hugh ("Percy") has previously met Julia, but is unaware of the their past sexual liaison.

This reciprocal ignorance of details known to the reader (and the narrator!), combined with the fact that "percy" is a euphemism for "penis" (as in the expression, "point percy at the porcelain" meaning "urinate"), provide an added layer of meaning to the indirection of the ensuing "indirect" dialog, wherein Armande comments to Julia that she believes Julia has met "Percy"; and Julia, who, clearly misinterprets this as "percy", allows that she believes she has--which fact Hugh also "believes", being the only one of the trio to whom both faces of the

ambiguity are accessible.

--John A. Rea, University of Kentucky

VN, AGHEYEV AND THE *NOVEL WITH COCAINE*

In his speech about the "Lolita Legacy" in New York in October 1996 (*Nabokovian* No. 37) Dmitri Nabokov mocks Nikita Struve who "had strenuously striven - for years - to demonstrate that, in the thirties, it was Nabokov who had written Levi-Agheyev's pretty bad, Moscow-based *Novel with Cocaine*". Dmitri Nabokov gave a hint that Levi, the presumable author of the novel, died in the Turkish city of Istanbul.

One can get the same information from the new Moscow edition of one of the most important reference books, Wolfgang Kasack's "Dictionary of Russian Literature in the 20th Century": Mark Levi (pseud. Agheyev) died in Istanbul in February 1936.

The information on Levi's death is based on information given by the Russian emigré poetess Lidiya Chervinskaya to the French emigré specialist René Guerra (the owner of the biggest collection of emigré literature and art) in 1985.

Chervinskaya, then already 84 years old, told Guerra that Levi was a Russian emigré who first lived in Germany, then in Turkey; that she had been Levi's mistress in the middle of the thirties; that she personally saw the blueprint of his *Novel with Cocaine*; that there were two versions of his fate: some people heard he had died from the abuse of cocaine in Istanbul, but she thought he went back to Russia on the eve of World War II.

Nobody wanted to believe the story of his reemigration to Russia. Somebody found in the register books of the Jewish cemetery of Istanbul that a certain Mark Levi was buried there in 1936 - so this date went into the reference books. (The cemetery no longer exists; in the 70s a highway was laid through the ground).

But the story of Levi's death in February 1936 turns out to be wrong. Proof was given by two specialists in émigré literature, G. Superfin and M. Sorokina, in 1994 in the 16th issue of the journal *Minuvsheye* (Paris/Moscow): "Byl takoy pisatel' Agheyev... Versiya sudby, ili o polze naivnogo biographfizma" (There was a writer named Agheyev... A Version of his Fate, or about the Utility of Naive Biographism", p. 265-272).

Dmitri Nabokov, as well as Wolfgang Kasack, obviously did not know this important publication, important because the authors found the final proof that indeed Levi wrote *Novel with Cocaine*. Superfin revealed the historical background of the work and proved that it was autobiographical (a small note about this was published in the Paris weekly "Russkaya mysl" on November 15th, 1991 - and obviously ignored by N. Struve).

The background in *Novel* is a private high school in Moscow (VN never had been to Moscow) named the Klayman-Gymnasium. Its heros are its students and teachers. Before the "October Revolution" of 1917 there was a famous private highschool in Moscow named Krayman-Gymnasium (with an R, not an L in the school's name). Superfin found in the archives of this school that among the students was a certain Mark Levi, from August 1912 to May 1916. Levi had two classmates named Burkevitch and Eisenberg as well as the teachers Semyonow and Volkmann--in the novel, written 20 years later, two students and two teachers have exactly the same names.

The first of the important documents concerning Levi's emigré years and his return to the USSR (Lidiya Chervinskaya who died in 1988 was right) was found accidentally in the archives of the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1942 a certain Mark Levi was expelled by Turkish police to the Soviet Union. The Turkish authorities blamed him for being involved in a plan to murder the German ambassador to Turkey. *[In 1942? Scarcely possible. G.B.]*

Two versions of his autobiography were found among

Levi's papers in the KGB archives. In one of them he wrote clearly that during his emigration years in Istanbul he wrote *Novel with Cocaine*.

Levi was not allowed to go back to Moscow. He was offered a job as a scholar of Russian linguistics at the Academy of Sciences in Yerevan, the capital of Soviet Armenia. He died at the age of 75 in Yerevan on August 5, 1973 having never published another novel.

The documents found by Superfin and Sorokina close for good the discussion about VN and *Novel with Cocaine*: Levi was the author - surely influenced by VN's prose.

--Thomas Urban, Warsaw

ZEMBLA: A TO Z.

The last item in the Index of *Pale Fire* stands for Zembla - a distant northern land and for several reasons it requires special attention. From the point of a semantic position, Zembla is quite different from the other items in the Index . While being one of the major themes in the novel and to a certain extent a key word in the plot construction, it appears in the Index without any numerical reference, in spite of the fact that Zembla is very often mentioned in the commentary as well as in the Index. This strangeness is sharpened by the fact that practically all other items in the Index, including even the smallest ones ,are numbered. This sends the reader back to the poem or the commentary. Moreover, a great majority of the items in the Index are devoted to the Zembla theme. Yet Zembla stands alone and does not refer the reader back into the book. In a sense, it sets a reader free and takes him out of the novel, because the story is over. In other words, we cannot finish reading *Pale Fire* until we have read the last item, because the Index entries send us back to the text again.

Another peculiarity of Zembla, apart from its basic

meaning and thematic aspect, is that the word *Zembla* begins and ends with the last and first letters of the English alphabet. This detail could be ignored if the motif of Alphabet had no noticeable place and meaning in the novel. Yet this motif supplies an additional meaning to "Pale Fire " and reveals some hidden ideas. The alphabet as a phenomenon should be understood, I think, as the alpha and omega of the logos reality, which comprises the world of words, that is, literature. Alphabet is the base, the foundation, a pattern combining all the constructive elements of the written reality.

The motif of alphabet appears right at the beginning of the commentary. Not by chance is it put in connection with the literary associations and connotations. The commentator, Charles Kinbote, while talking about John Shade's murderer Jakob Gradus in the notes to lines 17, mentions two thematically related places Zembla and Appalachia, which in turn confine the textual space of the poem within the boundaries of Z and A. Further, it also brings to mind the idea of the interdependence of such categories as "beginning" and "ending". The above-mentioned places determine the "route " which the readers should follow along with the character. The transition from Zembla to Appalachia is presented in terms of a literary journey. Kinbote says: "We shall accompany Gradus in constant thought, as he makes his way from distant dim Zembla to green Appalachia, through the entire length of the poem, following the road of its rhythm, riding past in a rhyme, skidding around the corner of a run-on, breathing with the caesura, swinging down to the foot of the page from line to line as from branch to branch, hiding between two words [see note to line 596], reappearing on the horizon of a new canto, steadily marching nearer in iambic motion, crossing streets, moving up with his valise on the escalator of the pentameter...". Thus, such words as rhythm, rhyme, run-on, caesura, canto, iambic motion, pentameter quite obviously show that the movement from Zembla to Appalachia, from Z to A, is taking place in the reality of letters.

A few pages later (note to lines 47-48) the motif of the alphabet gains further development. Kinbote, while talking about the house he used to live in, gives the names of Judge Goldsworth's daughters in the alphabetic order: Alphina, Betty, Candida, Dee. At the same time when he mentions the judge's wife and her intellectual interests, this motif sounds again in the context of literary connection. Here we have: "Judging by the *novels* in Mrs. Goldsworth's boudoir, her intellectual interests were fully developed, going as they did from Amber to Zen" [italics are mine. V.M.]. Further, while interpreting line 62, Kinbote mentions in one connection Judge Goldsworth's alphabetic family and the "northern distant land", again the reader meets a literary allusion–*Heliotropium turgenevi.*

Thus, the motif of the alphabet is put in strict correlation with the categories of space, or place: land [Zembla], place [Appalachia], the house of Judge Goldsworth, the boudoir of Mrs. Goldsworth–as well as with various literary connotations.

One more argument supporting the suggestion that the semantic meaning of the word Zembla must include the idea of the alphabet comes from the Russian version of the book *[as translated by Mrs. Nabokov. I remember a long conversation with her concerning this particular item, in late August, 1981. She had asked for my opinion, and after a day's thinking I suggested turning the word Zemblia, which, in Russian, happens to END in the last letter of the alphabet, upside down, which would, on the one hand, justify its placement where it belongs, and, on the other, point to Kinbote's madness by a curiously* literary *means, for this is exactly what Gogol does towards the end of his Notes of a Madman, when his poor character's bewilderment takes over. On deliberation, she rejected this as too tricky and "typographical", and was right. But I did not quite like the "iacheika iashmy" solution either, for it had none of the tragic ring of the book's last words. GB].* The last item in the Index appeared as "iacheika iashmy"–the words which should correspond to Zembla (the last

item in the English version). Indeed, they perfectly do, despite the fact that their meaning is totally different from Zembla. But both words begin and end with the last and the first letters of the Russian alphabet–IA and A, and from the formal point they are absolutely identical with the word Zembla. In the English version " iacheika iashmy" appears as "an orbical of jasp" though not in the Index but in the poem, when the poet is meditating on Terra the Fair. This transplantation took place because of the discrepancy between the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets and the translator, to a certain extent, had to sacrifice the meaning to the form. Actually, we do not know for certain that the poet, when he is talking about Terra the Fair, really means Zembla, or hints at it. But then again, in terms of a formal coherence, the words " iacheika iashmy" and Zembla are utterly identical. Finally, I think there is no need to argue that the form as a constructive element in *Pale Fire* not only contains or conveys the meaning but also functions as a meaning unto itself.

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