

A BLITZ INTERVIEW WITH
DONALD BARTON JOHNSON

by Yuri Leving

W *hat was the first ever Nabokov's text that you have read?*

I'm sure it was *Lolita* a few years after its U.S. publication in August 1958. My academic interests at the time were largely in Slavic linguistics although I have always been a voracious reader of fiction. It was only after I got tenure at UC Santa Barbara that I gradually shifted to literary studies.

What exactly hooked you on to this writer's prose?

I can't recall specifically why VN. Elegance? The opportunity to combine work in both Russian and English literature? I was also much taken with the then almost unknown Sasha Sokolov. Both of these interests were promoted by my friendship with the late Carl Proffer and his wife Ellendea Proffer who had established Ardis Press at the University of Michigan.

Why did I get hooked on VN? It was almost virgin territory.

You've made numerous critical discoveries during your long and prolific career as a Nabokov scholar. Is there one that you are personally especially fond of?

As you point out, I’ve stumbled across a lot of “critical (and not so critical) discoveries” over the years. At this point, I don’t have any particular favorite. Indeed, I am sometimes surprised when I run across references to my work. Did I say that?

Resorting to a neologism describing a founder of a startup, one might call you an ultimate “academic startupper” (and for a scholar who resides just miles away from the Silicon Valley this is not an inappropriate one). What did you personally find so attractive in this kind of catalyzing activity that complemented your own research?

The idea that I was an entrepreneur seems strange to me. With *NABOKV-L* and *Nabokov Studies* I was simply doing things that caught my fancy. By the way, while I did launch *Nabokov Studies*, most of the subsequent project was done by others. *NABOKV-L* has drawn many people into the field and established many useful relationships among them.

Do you feel that electronic innovations are still apt in the field of Nabokov studies?

Electronic innovations are of course desirable. You, Yuri, have played a major role in this area – one much appreciated by many.

I remember vividly your speech in St. Petersburg, passionately delivered from the stage of the Lensovet Theater, prior to the performance of a play based on Nabokov’s novel, King, Queen, Knave, in April 1999; you spoke about its author’s miraculous comeback to homeland and to his native Russian reader. Indeed, we all had high hopes that Dmitri Nabokov would help rebuild the Vyra family estate, that the Nabokov Museum would thrive as an independent cultural institution, and that dozens of Russian-speaking young scholars would soon emerge... What is your reality check

today, almost two decades later: Have you been surprised, enthralled, or disappointed since then?

My 1999 talk in Petersburg has completely fled my aging mind. I have pretty much lost contact with the Nabokov Museum but it seems to struggle along. There are, I think, a (very substantial) number of Russian Nabokovians and the Museum is still a center for scholarly events and meetings. I gather that the Russian government does not provide support nor, so far as I know, does the Nabokov Estate. I could be wrong about all this. In any case, your online Nabokov activities are a major blessing for the field.

With all your wisdom and experience, do you have any predictions or insights in which direction the industry is heading?

I'm afraid I don't have any thoughts about the direction of VN studies.

