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NABOKOV AND LAUGHLIN:

A MAKING OF AN AMERICAN WRITER¹

In 1969, Alden Whitman asked Vladimir Nabokov a question: “You have called yourself an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England. How does this make you an American writer?” The author answered: “An American writer means, in the present case, a writer who has been an American citizen for a quarter of a century. It means, moreover, that all my works appear first in America.”² Nabokov’s rather baffling answer underscores the simple, tautological fact that publishing works in America makes one an American writer. Whatever country or culture they publish in, writers internalize and reflect local norms that lay the groundwork for publication. This recurrent, reflexive process localizes the writer in the country or culture. In other words, Russian emigrant writer V. Sirin became American canonical writer Vladimir Nabokov, whom we know because he continued to publish first not in England but in the United States, even though the majority of his English novels were written in Europe, and *Lolita* first appeared in Paris.

According to Colette Colligan, who scrutinized the relationship between Nabokov and Olympia Press, Nabokov’s massive literary reputation often obscures the idea that all of his works are also cultural products.³ Indeed, his literary persona—a

¹ Quotes from Vladimir Nabokov’s unpublished letters in the Berg Collection (NYPL) and Houghton Library (Harvard) under agreement with the Wylie Agency (London). All rights reserved, 2016.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage, 1990, p. 131.

³ Colette Colligan. *A Publisher’s Paradise: Expatriate Literary Culture in Paris, 1890-1960*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013, p. 246.

“verbal magician,” as John Updike called Nabokov in his review of *The Defense*—has established an unshakable presence in the public consciousness.⁴ Needless to say, however, every literary text depends on its context, regardless of how independent and singular the mind behind the text may appear to be. From this point of view, investigating Nabokov’s connections with publishers illustrates how the United States received Nabokov, who came from a totally different culture, and how the author responded to that reception.

Additionally, it is important to address Nabokov’s talent as self-promoter and literary agent of his own literary persona. Yuri Leving recently completed an exhaustive investigation of the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress. Though he did not focus on correspondence with specific editors and publishers, he concluded:

Nabokov engaged on all layers of marketing and self-promotion, knowing that the greater his symbolic capital the more he could demand from his publishers in actual profit. This is not to diminish his substantial literary talents, but it does underscore the market realities for even a literary great such as Vladimir Nabokov.⁵

This paper concentrates on Nabokov’s relationship with James Laughlin and his publishing house New Directions. Laughlin, the “man of letters” who founded New Directions and also had a career as a minor poet, left behind a vast amount of correspondence with writers such as Ezra Pound, Henry Miller, William Carlos Williams, Thomas Merton, Guy Davenport, and Delmore Schwartz. Laughlin was among the first publishers and editors to handle Nabokov in the United States, undoubtedly playing as great a role in naturalizing Nabokov in the “New World” as did Edmund Wilson. Although collections of Laughlin’s selected letters are available from W. W. Norton, the only work to present even a small sampling of the correspondence between Nabokov and Laughlin is Matthew J. Bruccoli’s *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters*.⁶ By investigating the more than 500 letters between Nabokov and Laughlin held

⁴ John Updike, “Grandmaster Nabokov,” *Vladimir Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 156.

⁵ Yuri Leving, Frederick H. White, *Marketing Literature and Posthumous Legacies: The Symbolic Capital of Leonid Andreev and Vladimir Nabokov*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013, p. 113.

⁶ Recently Ian S. MacNiven published the first biography of James Laughlin. Though he referred to the publisher’s relationship with Nabokov in the chapter 13, I will examine their partnership more meticulously. Ian S. MacNiven, *“Literchoor Is My Beat”: A Life of James Laughlin, Publisher of New Directions*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014.

by the Houghton Library at Harvard University and the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library, in addition to a number of key paratexts and peritexts, including publisher's blurbs and book jackets, that Gérard Genette defined in his monograph,⁷ I attempt to shed new light on the literary "honeymoon" and discord between the two figures, in order to better understand Nabokov's American years.

On May 26, 1940, the Russian writer V. Sirin—a distinguished author, though a complete unknown in English reading circles—landed in New York City with the English manuscript of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. For a newcomer to the United States, finding a suitable publisher was a pressing issue. After enduring several rejections, he finally made the acquaintance of James Laughlin, the twenty-six-year-old president of New Directions, through Edmund Wilson. Laughlin sought the opinion of his close friend Delmore Schwartz about this obscure writer's first work in English.

I have read the novel Nabakov [sic] sent in, and find it brilliant and beautiful. But you will have to read it with care, too. It is that kind of special writing which will not interest many persons: like Goodman, although somewhat more mature. If you print it, you will be doing so for pure love. Levin says he published two novels in England, both without success. I suspect that he has books that are even better. You might also get Nabakov to translate Pushkin for you, or other Russian poets. "Evgeni Onegin" would be something to have well translated in English. Nabakov had a short playlet of P's in a recent New Republic. Or he might write on Tolstoy, Dost., Chekhov?⁸

As early as May 1941, surprisingly, Schwartz had already surmised that Nabokov had written better Russian novels than *Sebastian Knight* and even predicted Nabokov's English translation of *Eugene Onegin* and his lectures on Russian literature.

On the other hand, even Schwartz was cautious about the possibility of Nabokov failing to find a wide audience—warnings that the success of *Lolita* eventually rendered mute. When Schwartz suggested that publishing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* would be "for pure love," however, Laughlin replied with conviction: "Yes, I will also give my soul to Nabokov."⁹ Clearly, Laughlin had become enamored with the writer.

⁷ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

⁸ Delmore Schwartz, TLS to JL, 14 May 1941. Houghton Library Harvard University, New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1514), folder 6. Later in the article this archive will be referred to as HLHU.

⁹ Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin, *Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*. Ed. Robert Phillips. New York: W. W. Norton, 1993, p. 102.

A grandson of steel magnate James H. Laughlin, James Laughlin IV was born into an extremely wealthy family. Laughlin dabbled regularly in poetry, but he eventually embraced the publishing circle through his relationship with Ezra Pound as a sophomore at Harvard. Pound's role in persuading Laughlin to become a publisher while the two spent time together in Rapallo inspired Laughlin's poem "Harvard—Boston—Rapallo," which chronicles the birth of an avant-garde publishing house: "You said I was / Such a terrible poet, I'd better / Do something useful and become / A publisher, a profession which / You inferred required no talent / And only limited intelligence."¹⁰

With a \$100,000 dollars gift from his father, Laughlin founded the New Directions publishing house in 1936, during his Harvard college days. Wearing the hats of both poet and publisher, Laughlin had a distinct vision as founder. The catalogue of New Directions in 1939 reads:

New Directions was founded <...> to foster the branches of literature which are being victimized by the excessive commercialization of American publishing <...>.

The present situation in American publishing is the product of several factors operating over a period of years: cheap printing, universal education and mass production methods in business. <...>[T]his is the rub, by broadening the public, and catering to the mass taste, it has allowed the standards of American writing to fall. <...> New Directions was founded to counteract, in its small way, the tendency to treat a book as nothing more than a package of merchandise. Perhaps the editor is an idealist. But that species is not yet extinct.¹¹

Laughlin's intense hatred of the American book business, a loathing that led him to declare profit-oriented publishers harmful to literature, came not only from his passion for literature as a poet but also from his ambivalence toward the very inheritance that allowed him to publish literary works.¹² For him, commercialism and distinguished literature were mutually exclusive. Nabokov was thus the perfect person for Laughlin to esteem: the exiled Russian aristocrat appeared completely immune to

¹⁰ James Laughlin, *Byways: A Memoir*. New York: New Directions, 2005, p. 86.

¹¹ *New Directions Books: Complete Catalogue*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1939. p. 2.

¹² In an autobiographical poem, he described his ancestors as "spoiled" people: "God-fearing people who / Married their own kind, reproducing / Their own kind, until there was / Too much money. It spoiled most of them." James Laughlin, *Byways: A Memoir*. New York: New Directions, 2005. p. 11.

the sway of Mammon. Publishing Nabokov's special writing for the happy few was just what Laughlin wanted.

The content of Nabokov's novel, a fragmentary account of novelist Sebastian Knight's life and death as told by his half-brother "V," also offered Laughlin a textual conduit for his revulsion to big business; *New Directions Books: A Preliminary Listing*, a pamphlet distributed to bookshops, declared the forthcoming *Sebastian Knight* novel to be "symbolic of the plight of the artist in a modern world which is essentially hostile to the spirit of art."¹³ An advertisement for *Sebastian Knight* in the 1941 catalogue also reflected the publisher's reading:

Sebastian Knight, of course, is an imaginary character, but he is a symbolic figure, and this novel has profound things to tell us about the problem of creative artists in a philistine world. In a sense, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a tragi-comedy of the soul's identity—the story of those who are expatriated by the materialism of modern life.¹⁴

Laughlin interpreted *Sebastian Knight* as a kind of Künstlerroman in which the protagonist-artist struggled with the disconnection between his ideal life and the mundane world. Sebastian Knight, like the martyr Saint Sebastian, was made an icon that fell victim to the cruel, modern world. In Laughlin's eyes, creative artists were to confront the "philistine world" and the "materialism of modern life." Laughlin even reprised his analysis in the flap of the book's dust jacket: "[T]his novel has things deep and important to tell about the role of creative artists in a modern world that is basically hostile to art."¹⁵ These views extended beyond the character of Sebastian Knight, coloring the publisher's perception of the book's author, as well.¹⁶ Through the process of abstracting Sebastian from the novel, however, Laughlin silenced the narrator V.

¹³ *New Directions Books: A Preliminary Listing*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941. p. 3.

¹⁴ *New Directions Books, 1941-1942*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941, p. 9. Laughlin used a slightly abridged version of the blurb for the *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* in 1941. *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*. 6 (1941): p. 744.

¹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941. Dust cover.

¹⁶ John Arthur Harrison, *Published for James Laughlin: A New Directions List of Publications, 1936-1997*. Fayetteville, Ark: Will Hall Books, 2008, p. 6.



Figure 1. The dust jacket of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New Directions).
From Michael Juliar’s collection.

The book design (figure 1) also reinforced the publisher’s interpretation of the work: on the dust jacket, designed by Alvin Lustig, a man cast in the image of an artist is turning his back on the vision of a book, as if he is forsaking the mundane world and the book business. The illustration, which stood out with a loud, vibrant design, was out of pace with the subdued mood that the Second World War had brought on: when the book appeared just after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Robert Barlow reviewed it as “the most inappropriate paper jacket of the season.”¹⁷

In addition to spelling out a clear artistic vision for his firm, Laughlin defined New Directions not only as a publishing house but as a “literary movement” in the annual catalogue issued in 1941:

New Directions is more than a publishing house. In a small way, it is a literary movement—not an organized group, but an affiliation of writers who are united by one strong bond: their conviction that literature is an art before it is a business.¹⁸

¹⁷ Robert Barlow, “For Future Reference,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* (December 20 1941): unpagged.

¹⁸ *New Directions Books, Fall & Winter, 1940-1941*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, p. 24.

Laughlin and his publishing house were an integral part of the American modernist movement. Researching the partnership between Laughlin and Pound, Greg Barnhisel defined the role Laughlin played as a publisher: “Laughlin orchestrated [. . .] the activities and attitudes of journalists, “book-review fellows,” and university professors, all in the behalf of his cantankerous and often resistant author.”¹⁹ Laughlin also established a close relationship not only with Pound but also with other modernist poets and writers, such as William Carlos Williams, Henry Miller, and Kenneth Rexroth, making him an active promoter of modernism.

Another advertisement of *Sebastian Knight* appeared in the *Saturday Review of Literature*,²⁰ positioning the line for the book—a “brilliant psychological novel”—between lines for works by Joyce and Miller. The adjective “psychological” was in vogue at the time and a cliché of modern literature; one could argue that the use of the word proved that Laughlin read the novel in the stream of modernism, a movement that he patronized.

Sebastian Knight was published in November 1941. New Directions printed only 1,500 copies for the first edition, and Nabokov earned just \$150 for the advance. Laughlin, however, had a distinct intention to welcome this newcomer to his literary circle and country:

I asked for the further options because I think we can build you [Nabokov] up over a period of time and finally get a steady public for you here. There are a few people who really know good writing and want it. But I wouldn't want you to entertain false hopes about our glorious country.²¹

Laughlin expected not an instant commercial success but a lasting relationship with Nabokov as long as he kept writing in the United States. Alongside Wilson's famous blurb, Laughlin himself penned the highest praise for Nabokov on the flaps of New Directions' first edition of *Sebastian Knight*: “We should be indeed grateful to Hitler for sending us Nabokov for he is an exceptionally gifted and subtle artist. It is to

¹⁹ Greg Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. p. 3.

²⁰ *Saturday Review of Literature* 24.35 (20 Dec. 1941): p. 15.

²¹ JL, TLS to VN, 2 July 1941, NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box, folder 1.

be hoped that he will put a number of his novels into English because they were considered as first importance by European critics.”²²

After the uproar of Pearl Harbor, however, *Sebastian* fell into oblivion and essentially vanished from the critical eye. One of the few reviewers who did discuss the work was Kay Boyle, who had already published two books from New Directions. Her review in *The New Republic*, which seemed to be a typical compliment for a new member to their circle, could be regarded as a precious sample illustrating how Laughlin’s critical circle tried to bring Nabokov into their group. More interestingly, Harry Goldgar’s review in *The Nashville Tennessean* was based entirely on the publisher’s blurb:

Subject matter for the novelists has in this century been increasingly provided by the problem of the artist in the modern world. Everything of James Joyce focuses on this configuration <...>. [Nabokov] has succeeded, too, in emphasizing the plight of Knight as a sensitive man in a world definitely hostile to the creative artist. The several brilliant finds which have been made recently by the little avant-garde house of New Directions are augmented and asterisked by the present book.²³

The obscure reviewer, indeed, seemed to crib Laughlin’s blurb and synopsis; the publisher’s promotion clearly affected readers’ interpretations. Goldgar naively paraphrased Laughlin’s assertion that the work was “symbolic of the plight of the artist in a modern world which is essentially hostile to the spirit of art” as “the plight of Knight as a sensitive man in a world definitely hostile to the creative artist.”

* * *

New Directions eventually published five books by Nabokov, with Laughlin actively working Nabokov into the company’s campaigns: upon the founding of his publishing house in 1936, Laughlin launched *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, an annual poetry anthology that included works from Pound, Williams, Stein, and Eliot—

²² Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1941. Dust cover.

²³ Harry Goldgar “A Sensitive Man in a World Hostile to the Creative Artist” *The Random Reader The Nashville Tennessean* 1942, January 11, B-Seven.

“the cream of modernism,” as William Corbett acutely pointed out.²⁴ In 1941, Laughlin’s enthusiasm for Nabokov led him to ask the author for translations of Vladislav Khodasevich, a total unknown in the United States, and put the translations in this flagship anthology to give the new associate a valuable appearance.²⁵

With the advent of New Directions as an avant-garde publishing house, Laughlin also took initiatives to expand the readership of the anthology. In 1941, for example, he created the “Poets of the Year” series, originally intended to be a monthly periodical chapbook, which featured not only American poets like Dylan Thomas, Malcolm Cowley, John Berryman, and Charles Henri Ford but also translations of works by foreign writers such as Bertolt Brecht and Rimbaud. Nabokov made his way into the Poets of the Year series, as well, with his translation of *Three Russian Poets* appearing in 1944.

In 1944, Nabokov’s second New Directions book, *Nikolai Gogol*, was published as not only a unique critical monograph but one of the titles of “The Makers of Modern Literature Series,” which a catalogue proclaimed as “a series of ‘critical Baedekers’ to the great modern writers who have formed our contemporary tradition.”²⁶ Beginning with Harry Levin’s renowned *James Joyce* in 1941, the series showcased David Daiches’ *Virginia Woolf* (1942), Vivienne Koch’s *William Carlos Williams* (1950), Hugh Kenner’s *Wyndham Lewis* (1954), and many other treatises on modernist writers. As the name of the series suggested, the readable guidebooks were intended to introduce modern writers into American higher education, though some of the subjects lay outside the modernist scope.

In the fall of 1946, Nabokov’s *Seven Stories* was announced in the fifth issue of a new series called *Pharos*, whose catalogue boasted an impressive lineup, including Ezra Pound’s translation of Confucius and Harry Levin’s critical essay on Stendhal, along with Nabokov’s collection of stories.²⁷ Laughlin explained to his readers that “[t]he magazine will be published intermittently, each number being devoted to an important piece of writing too long for inclusion in the other literary magazines, or to the work of a single writer”²⁸ and that the publication would be “[a] magazine dedicated to creative writing, which is published intermittently at the pleasure of the editor.”²⁹ Though *Pharos* was short-lived in its original incarnation, Laughlin later renewed it as

²⁴ William Corbett archive for “A History of New Directions”, 1967-1998 (inclusive), *A History of New Directions*: TS (printout), 1997. bMS Am 2092 (5), folder 1, p. 8. HLHU.

²⁵ *New Directions in Prose and Poetry* 6 (1941): pp. 596-600.

²⁶ *New Directions Books, 1941-1942*. p. 18.

²⁷ *New Directions Books*, New York: New Directions, 1946, p. 5.

²⁸ Tennessee Williams, “Battle of Angels.” *Pharos* 1-2 (Spring 1945): p. 4.

²⁹ Harry Levin, “Toward Stendhal.” *Pharos* 3 (Winter 1945): p. 3.

Direction. In 1947, Laughlin culled nine stories from Nabokov's stock short stories for the second volume of the brand-new *Direction* series and titled the collection *Nine Stories* because, as Laughlin saw it, "it is not a real book."³⁰ Featuring the works of Raymond Queneau, Boris Pasternak, and Elio Vittorini, the new series issued over twenty volumes and expanded the range of its content into the international modernism school.

In launching these series, Laughlin hoped to propagate his vision of modernism throughout the United States. Nabokov, of course, was to play a central role in Laughlin's project. In 1942, Laughlin asserted that "the standard of your [Nabokov's] writing fits perfectly with our aims and ideals."³¹ Laughlin also tried to use Nabokov's short story for New Directions' anthology *Spearhead: 10 Years' Experimental Writing in America*, though the attempt finally failed. Laughlin evaluated Nabokov's work "in the experimental vein," in which he preferred the early short story "Cloud, Castle, Lake" to the rather recent one "A Forgotten Poet," which the author offered first. Considering the fact that "Cloud, Castle, Lake" was originally written in Russian in 1937 and published in Berlin, the story would have been an extremely odd fit for the "10 Years' Experimental Writing in America" label—"A Forgotten Poet," which Nabokov actually wrote in English first in 1944, seemed to dovetail better with the collection's scope. These differences highlighted Laughlin's tendency to see Nabokov's earliest Russian works in a different context than the author did, a perceptive incongruity that underscored the divergence between what Nabokov believed was his best output and what Laughlin wanted for New Directions.³²

At the same time, Laughlin experimented both in the literary movement and in the marketing realm in order to identify the best way to distribute his books to readers. He decided to introduce "package deals" into New Directions' products: "The Poets of the Year" noted that "twelve numbers were issued each year and priced at 50 cents each for the pamphlet and \$1 for the bound edition, by the set \$5.50, boxed."³³ *Direction*, meanwhile, was available in "[s]ubscriptions—\$2 for four numbers—and orders for single issues—\$1.50 each."³⁴ Additionally, he adopted a target market

³⁰ JL, TLS to VN, Aug. 1946. NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box, folder 15.

³¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, p. 62.

³² JL, TLS to VN, 6 Sep. 1946. NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box, folder 11, JL, TLS to VN, 10 Sep. 1946. NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box, folder 12.

³³ Vladimir Nabokov ed. and trans., *Three Russian Poets: Selections from Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev in New Translations*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944. dust jacket.

³⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Nine Stories*. New York: New Directions, 1947, p. 2.

strategy: “The Makers of Modern Literature Series” was the publisher’s first attempt to sell books to specific readers—college students.

In 1941, Laughlin began commissioning Alvin Lustig, a designer, to design many jackets for New Directions releases. Acting in unison with New Directions, Lustig, “the most rigorous of the American graphic designers who strove to adapt both the forms and philosophy of European modernism to the realm of design,” created “identifiable brands through the visual language of modernist design,” as Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger have argued.³⁵ Lustig was behind the jackets for three Nabokov works—*Sebastian Knight*, *Nikolai Gogol*, and *Nine Stories*. Laughlin stated that the progressive graphic art that characterized Lustig’s jackets for the “New Classics Series,” *Direction*, and “The Makers of Modern Literature Series” not only attracted readers’ attention but also served to “symbolize in physical terms the desired isolation of our editorial program from that of the great commercial houses.”³⁶

Strangely enough, the success of this marketing strategy created a dilemma for Laughlin; after all, he had founded New Directions in a revolt against the profit-chasing book business world. After Lustig’s death, however, Laughlin absolved the remarkable jacket designs by saying that:

It is perhaps not a very good thing that people should buy books by eye. In fact, it’s a very bad thing. People should buy books for their literary merit. But since I have never published a book which I didn’t consider a serious literary work—and never intend to—I have had no bad conscience about using Lustig to increase sales.³⁷

Laughlin had some ambivalence about the packaging of his company’s books. Regardless of what the founder felt, book designs clearly defined the publisher’s brand color. Paradoxically, Laughlin’s refusal to sell books as “a package of merchandise” only led to selling books as “a package of avant-garde” or “a package of modernism.”

At least to some degree, Nabokov’s image as a writer’s writer or stylistic artist owes its development to the publications of New Directions. Clearly, the overall tones of the publishing house and the author himself were mutually complementary. The

³⁵ Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger. *By its Cover: Modern American Book Cover Design*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2005, p. 45, 49.

³⁶ James Laughlin, “The Design of Alvin Lustig.” *Publishers Weekly* (5 November 1949): pp. 2005-2006.

³⁷ James Laughlin, *Bookjackets by Alvin Lustig for New Directions Books*. New York: Gotham Book Mart Press, 1947, p. 5.

public identity of New Directions, a progressive publishing house, contributed to Nabokov's image, and vice versa. Whether he liked it or not, Nabokov came off as a member of Laughlin's modernist mafia family in the 1940s. New Directions' publishing campaigns also offered Nabokov ideal platforms for exhibiting his versatility in offering the writer creative outlets not only as a novelist but also as a translator, short-story writer, and scholar. It is crucial to recognize Laughlin's contributions in showcasing Nabokov's multiple talents, particularly in less lucrative genres, to the American audience.

* * *

Laughlin left the West Coast to visit Nabokov in Cambridge in 1941, an exaggerated, strikingly American gesture of admiration that touched Nabokov deeply. In the beginning of 1942, Nabokov even said to Edmund Wilson that "I like New Directions immensely and am by no means on the lookout for another publisher."³⁸ On the other hand, he had rapidly acclimated himself to his new circumstances as an American writer; in his Russian years, his readership had been a closed audience of emigrant Russians. Whereas he once published his works through a few foreign Russian publishers, papers, and journals, he now had a vast readership as an English writer. He could freely choose any publishing house to obtain a wide readership for his convenience; in the same letter, he asked Wilson about the possibility of publishing his work from another publisher.

One of the main reasons for Nabokov's contradictory attitude was Edmund Wilson, the middleman between the writer and the publisher, who had been drifting apart from Laughlin; at the time, Wilson's partnership with Laughlin was breaking down over the editorial approach to F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Crack-Up*. Indeed, the correspondence between Wilson and Nabokov in the 1940s contains numerous references to Laughlin—their mutual friend "good old J." As Wilson had been Nabokov's guide to the American publishing world, his estrangement from New Directions exerted a great influence on Nabokov's behavior: in that sense, the *Nabokov-Wilson Letters* presents an entertaining, illuminating lens on the negotiations between the author and the publisher.

After the publication of *Sebastian Knight*, indeed, Nabokov entered a certain rebellious phase that found two main targets: his publisher and its promotional activities. During the mid-1940s, the partnership between New Directions and Nabokov faced two

³⁸ Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*, p. 62.

serious crises: in 1943, first of all, Nabokov and Wilson conspired against Laughlin to further their joint authorship of a project on Russian literature with the larger publishing powerhouse Doubleday. When Nabokov tried to withdraw the translation from New Directions for *Three Russian Poets*, Laughlin sent a “Howl” (as Nabokov said to Wilson³⁹) to Nabokov on December 21, 1943: “Your volume is part of the series and I have nothing to substitute. The book was promised to the subscribers for some months ago [sic] and I really can’t do anything but give it to them.”⁴⁰ As the guiding force behind “The Poets of the Year,” Laughlin kept resisting the intrigue of Bunny-Wilson and Volodya-Nabokov’s joint project, which eventually dissipated.

Nabokov extended the line of battle from outside the text into the text itself by appending *Nikolai Gogol* with a very provocative “Commentaries.” Writing in first person, Nabokov depicted himself “in the lounge of an Alpine hotel” arguing with “my editor” about the necessity of bibliography and chronology.⁴¹

“No, you have not,”—he [the editor] said.—“I have gone through it carefully and so has my wife, and we have not found the plots. There should also be some kind of bibliography or chronology at the end. The student ought to be able to find his way, otherwise he would be puzzled and would not bother to read any further.”

<...> He said that a student would not be necessarily an intelligent person and anyway would resent the trouble of having to look up things. I said there were students and students. He said that from a publisher’s point of view there was only one sort.⁴²

Ringed with veracity, the passage reads like an excerpt of a conversation between Nabokov and Laughlin. Judging only from the description in the text, “my publisher” was too obstinate to understand the writer’s view toward his work and readership. “[F]rom a publisher’s point of view,” however, Laughlin’s assertion was fully justified in order to maintain coherence, considering that *Nikolai Gogol* was not only a seminal piece of research but one of the titles in “The Makers of Modern Literature” series.

After the title of *Nikolai Gogol* was eliminated from the series, Nabokov’s strong opinions about his own work initially appear to be a product of his artistic rigor.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 129.

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 130.

⁴¹ Vladimir Nabokov. *Nikolai Gogol*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944. p. 151.

⁴² Ibid. p. 152.

However, the point lies a little deeper: Nabokov publicly rebelled against the firm's publishing campaigns. In addition to foregrounding barbs in the "Commentaries," Nabokov also declared that he set three "snares" in his *Gogol*.⁴³ Although Schwartz sternly warned Nabokov against such imprudence, Laughlin maintained an indulgent attitude toward his favorite author.⁴⁴

Brian Boyd pointed out that "[Nabokov's] relationship with Laughlin had already become strained" in 1943,⁴⁵ but that heightened tension did not put an end to their association or correspondence. When visiting Laughlin's Alta Lodge in July 1943, Nabokov expressed a fondness for the landscape of the Wasatch Mountains ("The tapering lines of firs on the slopes amid a greyish green haze of aspens remind me of the so-called "Russian" style in painting <...>")⁴⁶ and invited Laughlin to join his butterfly hunt. Later, Nabokov asked Laughlin to send some ants and grass from Alta, and Laughlin willingly supplied the author with some samples—and, later on, with funding: when Nabokov "happened to be in great financial difficulties" in 1951,⁴⁷ Laughlin immediately sent \$250 as an "interest free loan" without ever inquiring about the reason.⁴⁸

As his partnership with Laughlin grew, Nabokov gradually gained insight into his editor's personality. In July 1943, Nabokov wrote to Wilson from Laughlin's Alta Lodge: "The landlord and the poet are fiercely competing in Laughlin—with the first winning by a neck."⁴⁹ Nabokov was keenly aware of Laughlin's inner conflict: his dedication to literature as art for art's sake would be admirable for a poet. However,

⁴³ In his unpublished history of *New Directions*, William Corbett wrote: "Nabokov claimed to have placed three mistakes or 'snares,' his word, in the text which when discovered would embarrass ND. What these were he never said, and if any reader has identified them he has kept their whereabouts to himself. It is unclear why Nabokov set the snares. He may have done so out of annoyance at the editorial advice that he outline the plots of Gogol's novels and plays. If this suggests a certain amount of contempt for *New Directions*, it is a joke in keeping with Nabokov's attitude toward publishers in so far as his letters and several biographers have revealed it." William Corbett archive for "A History of *New Directions*", 1967-1998 (inclusive), *A History of New Directions*: TS (printout), 1997. bMS Am 2092 (5), folder 3, p. 45. HLHU. James Laughlin also spoke reminiscently: "He [Nabokov] declared that in his *Gogol* there were three pulls of my leg, but I've never been able to find them—and he wouldn't tell." James Laughlin, *The Way It Wasn't: From the Files of James Laughlin*. Ed. Barbara Epler and Daniel Javitch. New York: New Directions, 2006. p. 198.

⁴⁴ A letter from Delmore Schwartz to JL dated 29 Aug. 1944 said: "<...> Nabokov's *Gogol* should never have been printed, or at least the reference to you should have been eliminated. In unreal Utah you have no idea of how they impinge upon the literary world <...>." Schwartz, *Delmore Schwartz and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*. p. 230.

⁴⁵ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton University Press, 1991. p. 64.

⁴⁶ Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*. p. 116.

⁴⁷ VN, ALS to JL, 20 March 1951, NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box, folder 6.

⁴⁸ JL, TLS to VN, 23 March 1951, NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box, folder 6.

⁴⁹ Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*. p. 116.

Nabokov also inferred that such idealistic attitudes would be too naïve for the owner of a publishing house to espouse. Indeed, New Directions had been operating in the red for some time, and the income from the lodge had compensated for the losses.

These financial constraints represented the driving factor behind Nabokov's decision to take his second English novel, *Bend Sinister*, to another suitor: H. Holt's Allen Tate offered an advance of \$2,000—a figure that dwarfed the \$150 advance that Nabokov had received from Laughlin just six years prior and remained well out of New Directions' reach.⁵⁰

The problem of royalties hung like a sword of Damocles over the partnership of Nabokov and Laughlin from the beginning; according to Andrew Field, for example, “Nabokov felt that his financial relations with New Directions were wild at first, though they eventually quieted down.”⁵¹ That initial uneasiness eventually grew into more palpable discord between the writer and the editor; Nabokov complained about his meager royalties in July 1942: “[T]he intense and rather devastating work which Gogol is giving me is worth more than the remuneration you suggested.”⁵² In fact, according to Corbett, his *Gogol's* first copies amounted to just 350 and not all of them had been sold when *Lolita* came.⁵³ The guarantee issue was also a sensitive one for Laughlin, with voices of discontentment about inadequate royalties coming from many corners of the New Direction stable. In 1950, for instance, William Carlos Williams left New Directions for Random House because of bad distribution and poor advertising, which later Laughlin admitted to in his long poem “Remembering William Carlos Williams.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Though Laughlin did not obtain the novel, he still praised the fruit of Nabokov's literary genius as “an extraordinary piece of work.” (JL, TLS to VN, 18 June 1947, NYPL Berg Collection Manuscript box 1, folder 20) Wilson, however, accused Nabokov of his incapacity to deal with politics: “You [Nabokov] aren't good at this kind of subject, which involves questions of politics and social change, because you are totally uninterested with those matters and have never taken the trouble to understand them. An artist may not take politics seriously” (Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*, p. 210). The reaction of Wilson, who had developed a close relationship with Nabokov, underlines the idea that Nabokov's image as an apolitical *artist* had already risen to the fore by the 1940s.

⁵¹ Andrew Field, *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Crown, 1986. p. 213.

⁵² Vladimir Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989. pp. 41-42.

⁵³ “The critical book on Gogol became a New Directions legend. First because it is most difficult New Directions first edition to come by. There may have been as few as 350 copies published and those still available when *Lolita* appeared were snapped up in the wake of Nabokov's sudden fame.” William Corbett archive for “A History of New Directions,” 1967-1998 (inclusive), *A History of New Directions*: TS (printout), 1997. bMS Am 2092 (5), folder 3, p. 45. HLHU.

⁵⁴ “He told / Bill that our distribution was Bad / and that I was too tight to / Spend much money on advertising. / The latter is true: publishers / Know to their pain that highbrow / Literary books can't be sold by / Ads, only good reviews and word / Of mouth will sell them.” Laughlin, *Byways: A Memoir*, pp. 174-175.

In April 1950, irritated by how long it was taking Laughlin to reprint *Laughter in the Dark*, Nabokov wrote these words in his letter to the publisher: “One of my first concerns is that unfinished business of the LAUGHTER IN THE DARK reprint. <...> After all, literature is not only fun, it is also business.”⁵⁵ That powerful phrase was not only a denial of his self-image as artist but a harsh indictment of Laughlin and New Directions’ dogma that “literature is an art before it is a business.” Laughlin’s “pure love” of Nabokov and his works had, it seemed, become one-sided.

* * *

There was a lull in their relationship for a few years. In 1950, Robert MacGregor, an assistant editor at *Theatre Arts* magazine, attracted the attention of Laughlin and became a managing director of New Directions. Entrusting all of New Directions’ practical business to MacGregor, Laughlin made the decision to become president of Intercultural Publication Inc. in 1951. Laughlin then proceeded to travel around the world, taking leave of his editing and correspondence alike. On February 3, 1954, however, Nabokov sent Laughlin a rather unexpected proposal: “Would you be interested in publishing a time bomb that I have just finished putting together?” Laughlin, who was on a business trip in India and Japan when the author’s letter first arrived, did not even have a chance to read the manuscript for a considerable period of time; writing to Wilson, Nabokov patiently waited for eight months with the manuscript “still in Laughlin’s large hands.”⁵⁶ After returning to the United States, Laughlin finally read the “time bomb” carefully with MacGregor. In October, the two decided to reject the amazing manuscript that would eventually become Nabokov’s most recognized work.

We both feel that it is literature of the highest order and that it ought to be published but we both worried about possible repercussions both for the publisher and the author. Your style is so individual that it seems to me absolutely certain that the real authorship would quickly be recognized even if a pseudonym were used.

Pondering this difficult problem, it occurs to me that you might want to consider publication in English with one of the Paris firms which specializes in

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977*, pp. 99-100.

⁵⁶ Nabokov, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*. p. 319.

unusual books. There still might be the possibility of recognition but because censorship would not be involved, the attendant publicity could be minimized.⁵⁷

Laughlin, who had forged close connections with Henry Miller, recommended Nabokov to publish the “problem child” in Paris. Again, it is important to note that Laughlin and MacGregor rejected the typescript not because they underestimated it but because they appreciated it: Laughlin also balked at publishing the work under a pen name because “[y]our style is so individual.” Laughlin’s refusal was nothing other than the highest praise in literary arts. If *Lolita* were to be taken to court, a small publisher like New Directions could not have covered the costs of a lawsuit—and Laughlin, who had once resurrected Pound’s fallen literary fame as a flag-bearer for modernism, was likely well acquainted with the difficulties of wiping an author’s name free of smears and blemishes.

In 1955, Olympia Press published *Lolita* in Paris as a Traveler’s Companion title. Graham Greene’s lavish praise for the work soon sparked a sensation, leading several large stateside publishers to make attempts at publishing *Lolita* despite the risk of legal repercussions. Jason Epstein, a lion of the new era of publishing who also tried to get the book published in the United States, would later become a prominent partner of Nabokov’s after Laughlin; he published *Pnin* as an editor at Doubleday, and his *Anchor Review* was the first American publication to print excerpts from *Lolita*. Epstein’s personal reaction to *Lolita*, however, was a stark departure from the widespread enthusiasm that the book was enjoying in literary circles at the time:

I did not find *Lolita* repulsive, nor did I find it the work of genius that it has since been called. I admired Nabokov’s early novels published by New Directions and preferred their cold precision to the plummy and it seemed to me rather cruel, if also very cruel, if also very funny, *Lolita*, in which Nabokov seemed to be congratulating himself on his jokes.⁵⁸

Surprisingly, the man who tried to publish *Lolita* in the United States did not recognize the value of the novel well. Epstein confessed that his motivation to publish the controversial novel was not artistic but speculative. “Nabokov’s early novels published by New Directions” (as quoted above) left a substantial impression on

⁵⁷ JL, TL (carbon copy) to VN, 11 Oct. 1954. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205), folder 9, HLHU.

⁵⁸ Jason Epstein, *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present, and Future*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2001, pp. 74-75.

Epstein, even though New Directions had published just one Nabokov novel by that point. That said, the New Directions name had carved out a solid place among avid Nabokov readers prior to *Lolita*. The book had left its mark on Laughlin and MacGregor, too, who repeatedly referred to *Lolita* in their letters to Nabokov even after turning down the manuscript. In a letter, Laughlin asked, “Did you ever do anything about that extremely interesting manuscript which you showed me some years back? I have no further thoughts about it, at the moment, but it sticks in my mind as a remarkable piece of work.”⁵⁹ MacGregor also said to Nabokov: “I remember it as one of the most fascinating novels I have read in English.”⁶⁰

In 1958, *Lolita* finally hit bookstore shelves through Putnam and shot to the top of the best-seller lists. The sensational work did not bring disgrace on Nabokov’s name, despite Laughlin’s anxieties that it would. As Laughlin feared,⁶¹ however, Nabokov did leave his teaching post at Cornell—but his departure was not because of the infamy but rather the wealth the book offered⁶². As the accolades accumulated, Nabokov proved that immortal literary fame and commercial success were *not* mutually exclusive. Additionally, Nabokov realized the compatibility between the two within the work itself: on the stylistic level, the unreliable, pedantic narrator Humbert Humbert artistically crystalized the United States, the kitschy materialistic world, which the twelve-year-old girl Lolita embraced. On the moral level, Nabokov actually emphasized the plight of Humbert “in a modern world which is essentially hostile to the spirit of art,” as Laughlin asserted in his blurb of *Sebastian Knight*⁶³. However, Humbert’s essentially evil motivation, i.e. possessing the innocent girl, for ‘art,’ is eventually rejected by Lolita herself, who toughly outgrows his conspiracy: if we suppose Laughlin’s dogma—“literature is an art before it is a business”—as an antithesis of the commercialized book business in America, Nabokov’s *Lolita* champions the idea that “literature is not only art but also business.” In that sense, Laughlin and New Directions may have urged Nabokov to write *Lolita*; the stateside publishing circumstances into

⁵⁹ JL, TL (carbon copy) to VN, 22 Dec. 1955. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 9, HLHU.

⁶⁰ Robert MacGregor, TL (carbon copy) to VN, 28 Feb. 1956. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 9, HLHU.

⁶¹ Later, Laughlin wrote: “I wrote saying: ‘Volya <sic>, you are so sophisticated, you may not realize the effect that this book is going to have on the college community of Cornell if you publish it. Your wife will be ostracized, stones will be thrown at your child.’” Laughlin, *The Way It Wasn’t: From the Files of James Laughlin*. p. 198.

⁶² Brian Boyd wrote: “[H]e had still less need of a university post: the paper back right of *Lolita* would be bought by Fawcett Crest for \$100,000.” Boyd, *American Years*. p. 374.

⁶³ *New Directions Books: A Preliminary Listing*. p. 3.

which the emigrant writer was thrown after his European, Russian-writing period could contextualize the back-story of *Lolita*.

After *Lolita* made its splash in the United States, Nabokov completely lost interest in business with New Directions and explicitly resisted New Directions' promotions. In a galley proof of the paperback edition of *Nikolai Gogol*, he crossed out the list of "The Makers of Modern Literature Series" in pencil.⁶⁴ He also protested against Edmund Wilson's revised blurb for the reprint edition of *Sebastian Knight*, which seemingly aimed to take advantage of the *Lolita* boom.

I am emphatically against any endorsement on the jacket by Edmund Wilson—especially in view of the atrocious nonsense he has been writing about the wretched and mediocre DOCTOR ZHIVAGO. He is a good friend of mine but I deplore his symbolo-social critical approach, I don't even want you to repeat on the jacket his twenty year old compliment to Sebastian Knight. My decision is final—please do not raise this question again.⁶⁵

Buoyed by the success of *Lolita*, Nabokov no longer required any of the established critical image that Laughlin and Wilson provided. In the same year, Nabokov left not only the American publishing circle but also the country itself. His reputation as an international author became worthy of a much larger critical, financial paradigm⁶⁶, one that occupied an echelon that escaped the reach of the modernist or avant-garde writers that New Directions could afford.

* * *

Nabokov, now a best-selling author, took a more aggressive stance toward publishing. He railed against his former publisher, asserting that New Directions had exploited him by unfair contract:

⁶⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*. Manuscript and Proofs of New Directions Books, bMS Am 2077.1 (1699), HLHU.

⁶⁵ VN, TLS to Griselda Jackson Ohannessian, 30 June 1959. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 11, HLHU.

⁶⁶ Brian Boyd wrote: "Although *Lolita* would sell fourteen million copies around the world by the mid-1980s, Nabokov naturally assumed in September 1959 that after more than a year on the best-seller lists (236,00 copies sold over bookstore counters, another 50,000 through book clubs), the book's sales would soon drop." Boyd, *American Years*. p. 387.

Let me put it this way. Our dispute over the SEBASTIAN KNIGHT contract has been going on now for ten years and more. You see yourself in retrospect as rescuing <sic> a poor young writer by offering him a generous contract—a \$100 advance against a flat royalty of 10% (and even adding later another 150 to the advance)—and reserving to yourself 50% cut on foreign publication rights. I see myself as a defenseless immigrant making a fresh start in the US and compelled to snatch at any offer coming his way for a starter.⁶⁷

Echoing the feelings of William Carlos Williams, Nabokov was also dissatisfied with New Directions' sales promotions. In July 1961, Nabokov finally delivered his ultimatum to New Directions via a letter from his wife.

He [Vladimir] is under the distinct impression that New Directions do not take too much interest in the success of his books. <...> [H]e thinks you rely much more on the possibility of an “automatic” success <...>. He wonders if New Directions might not prefer, under the circumstances, to sell back to him all rights in his works.⁶⁸

Nabokov's ultimatum did not, however, rattle New Directions—a company with roots in the United States, where one makes a point of contracts. The firm consistently held Nabokov to legalities: one of the most pressing issues between Nabokov and New Directions was *Sebastian Knight*, as Nabokov was preparing his complete works in a paperback edition. The contract signed twenty years prior to the disagreement provided that the author would share the profit of any reprint edition, including paperback and translation in a foreign language, with the publisher on a fifty-fifty basis. Though Véra Nabokov and Robert McGregor exchanged many letters on the matter from 1958 and into the 1970s, an effective compromise continued to elude them. In his letter to French writer Dionys Mascolo, dated April 27, 1962, McGregor compared the publisher's relationship with the Nabokovs to “friendly fencing matches.” Rather ironically, their relationship—an outgrowth of “pure love”—degenerated into such business talk.

As time went by, New Directions itself changed: in 1964, the company was incorporated as the New Directions Publishing Corporation, which meant that it was no longer a private publishing house of Laughlin. Though the company was still

⁶⁷ VN, TLS to JL, 13 May 1974. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 16, HLHU.

⁶⁸ Véra Nabokov, TLS to Robert MacGregor, 12 July 1961. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 12, HLHU.

independent, the founder's spirit of anti-commercialism sank into oblivion amidst the throes of a fiercely competitive publishing world. New Directions had revised Laughlin's passionate blurb focusing on the artist against the philistine world into a multi-layered reading on the back cover and updated the artwork from Lustig to the photograph of a puppet manipulating a puppet, which suggested the relationship between Sebastian and V, in the reprint edition of *Sebastian Knight* in 1959.

Vladimir Nabokov in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* works his perverse magic in more than one dimension. On the surface, this is a literary detective story—subtle, intricate, and building to a tantalizing climax. On another level, it has pungent points to make about the role of the artist in a society that is basically hostile to the creative spirit. Going deeper yet, the book probes the essential problem of the ambiguity of human identity: just who *was* Sebastian Knight?

In 1971, Nabokov wrote to Laughlin about the rapid change in publishing, saying:

Thirty years ago, in 1941, I don't think either of us had any realization of the changes in publishing that would occur. In 1941 we were thinking primarily about a cloth covered edition of my book but that, possibly, we might jointly grant permissions to others for parts of the book to be reprinted in literary journals, anthologies, and the like. We would share equally what was paid for such permissions. But, in my view, our agreement never dealt with the right to bring out a complete edition in paper covers.⁶⁹

Indeed, in the 1940s, nobody could have anticipated the tumultuous changes that would consume the publishing world or Nabokov's ascent to international fame. Since the 1960s, literary works have been more commonly reused in different formats such as library editions, book club editions, or paperbacks. Selling the translation rights to foreign publishers, meanwhile, has become an increasingly important component of business. Many publishers have had to amalgamate in order to survive. Nabokov adapted himself in the stream of business and published his works through huge publishing power not only in the United States but in foreign countries, as well.

⁶⁹ VN, TLS to JL, 4 Oct. 1971. New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 15, HLHU.

Even in the cold, proxy-led war between Véra and MacGregor, Laughlin sometimes sent letters to the Nabokovs, repeatedly referring to his Alta Lodge. He deplored the large-scale development that had loosed a proliferation of ski lifts and massive restaurants in Alta's ski area: "I'm sad to report that the place is growing too much for my taste. I loved old wildness."⁷⁰ Nabokov replied to Laughlin: "I have been hunting butterflies in Sicily this Spring but always remember with a nostalgic thrill the lupines and aspens of the Rockies. SEBASTIAN is now thirty and LOLITA sixteen."⁷¹ Laughlin answered the letter: "I fear that the butterfly population in Alta is going to be driven out by the human encroachment."⁷² Laughlin might have superimposed Alta—a place that was "growing too much for my taste"—onto his publishing company and the expanding world of book business, while the landscape of the old, undeveloped Alta and the memory of hunting butterflies in the Rockies formed a perfect metaphor of the friendship that Nabokov and Laughlin might have shared.

After the death of MacGregor in 1974, Laughlin completely took over the negotiations with the Nabokovs. Eventually, in June 1976, just a year before the writer's death, Laughlin and New Directions agreed to relinquish all foreign rights to *Sebastian Knight* in exchange for seven and a half percent of the author's royalties for its paperback edition.⁷³ The letter in which Laughlin described the details of their agreement was the last piece of correspondence between Nabokov and Laughlin.

Despite the long, deep history between the two, Laughlin published neither poem nor prose on Nabokov as he wrote on William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound.⁷⁴ He, however, bitterly remembered Nabokov later: "I wanted to be his friend, but he didn't want any jejune nincompoop to be his friend. <...> He would force a smile for me sometimes but it was a long-ways-away smile."⁷⁵ Their possible friendship was impeded by changes both in the author and in the nature of the publishing world. Nabokov showed remarkable alacrity in forming a business-oriented relationship with Laughlin to establish a footing for his work in the American publishing circle, a

⁷⁰ JL, TL (carbon copy) to VN, 15 March 1966, New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 14, HLHU.

⁷¹ VN, TLS to JL, 28 Aug. 1970, New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 15, HLHU.

⁷² JL, TL (carbon copy) to VN, 11 Sep. 1970, New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 15, HLHU.

⁷³ JL, TL (carbon copy) to VN, 1 June 1976, New Directions Publishing Corp. records, bMS Am 2077 (1205) folder 17, HLHU.

⁷⁴ In August 1974, Laughlin wrote an unpublished holograph poem on Nabokov: "There once was a man of the net / Both tennis and pale blue Anette / Whose love of the dollar / Made Publishers holler / 'Enough, Sir, you'll serve us yet.'" James Laughlin papers bMS Am 2077 (1591) folder 57, HLHU.

⁷⁵ Laughlin, *The Way It Wasn't: From the Files of James Laughlin*, p. 198.

connection that at times proved irksome and produced sales that fell short of the author's expectations but also gave Nabokov the brand image he needed—of an artistic, critical-favorite publisher with an avid, discerning readership—to progress to a certain point. Laughlin, on the other hand, was more given to befriending his authors and creating literary products out of those relationships; despite Laughlin's efforts to “discover” Nabokov the “English writer” and work Nabokov into his own literary outlook, Nabokov, who had already published his Russian works in a totally different context, did not fit with Laughlin's approach. On the other hand, amongst the rapid changes in the publishing business in the United States, Laughlin himself was forced to change his approach due to the circumstances. Even though Vintage books now publishes all of Nabokov's novels and stories in paperback, New Directions' editions of Nabokov's works are still available as vestiges of the past alliance between Nabokov and Laughlin—a writer-publisher relationship that lacked the momentum to solidify Nabokov's image as a “New Directions writer” but played a major role, both directly and indirectly, in priming the author for success in the United States.

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