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ROBERT BURNES —
VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S ENGLISH TUTOR

Robert Burness, a namesake and possibly a kin of the great Scottish poet (the bard used this original surname until March of 1786),¹ was Nabokov's English tutor during the winters of 1907 and 1908.²

Nabokov describes him as “a large Scotsman with florid face, light-blue eyes and lank, straw-colored hair.”³ The writer recalls that Burness “spent his mornings teaching at a language school and then crammed into the afternoon more private lessons than the day could well hold.”⁴ Apparently, Burness was a reputable pedagogue since Nabokov's parents did not mind their son habitually waiting for his tutor for “[N]early an hour.”⁵ In his Russian memoir, *Other Shores* (*Drugie berega*), Nabokov elaborates that Mr. Burness's lessons usually consisted of his silently

¹ According to John Burness, an expert genealogist, specifically on the Burness family, “most likely that he [Robert Burness] was directly related to Robert Burns”; an electronic communication of July 28, 2008.

² Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 77.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 87.

⁴ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 87–88.

⁵ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 88.

going over the previous homework, followed by a dictation exercise, which he would immediately correct, and finally of writing down a new homework assignment for his pupil.⁶ Nabokov recalls “the terrific energy with which he [Burness] pressed on the spluttering pen as he wrote down, in the roundest of round hands, the tasks to be prepared for the next day.”⁷

At that time, all Nabokov knew about Burness that he was “a language school” teacher.⁸ Not until “[A] quarter of a century later,” that is circa 1933, did Nabokov learn that “Burness, by then dead, had been well known in Edinburgh as a scholarly translator of the Russian romantic poems” that, as the writer put it, “had been the altar and frenzy of my boyhood.”⁹

The eldest child of James Burness (1840–1923) and Henrietta Ronaldson (1843–1919), Robert Burness was born on August 23, 1873, in Edinburgh, Scotland.¹⁰ Similarly to Nabokov’s father, Vladimir Dmitrievich, James Burness was a jurist. However, unlike Nabokov’s father who was a law professor and a scholar (V. D. Nabokov taught criminology at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence and authored several books and a slew of articles on various judicial subjects), Burness senior, a Writer to the Signet (W. S.), was an Edinburgh practicing lawyer (solicitor) and “one of the founding partners of the Scottish law firm W&J Burness.”¹¹

Robert Burness received a fine education: he attended Fettes College, an independent boarding and day school in his native Edinburgh (1888–92), for studies in which he “gained an Open Scholarship.” He particularly excelled in Classics, “having gained Governors’ Prize for Latin verses.”¹² Founded in 1870 at the bequest of Sir William Fettes, the College has become one of the most respectable educational institutions in Europe. Many of its pupils later distinguished themselves in various fields of activity.¹³ Upon graduating from Fettes, Burness first went to University of Edinburgh (1892–93) and then continued his studies at Oxford

⁶ See Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*. 5 vols. (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 1999–2000), 5: 198.

⁷ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 90.

⁸ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 88.

⁹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 93.

¹⁰ See John Burness, *Burness Genealogy and Family History*, <http://www.burness.ca/p528.htm#i5275>.

¹¹ The Society of Writers to Her Majesty’s Signet is Scotland’s association for lawyers and one of the world’s oldest independent professional bodies. For the information about James Burness’s law firm, I am once again indebted to John Burness (electronic communication of July 28, 2008).

¹² A letter by R. C. Watt to Dr. F. Hilton of July 24, 1972. Here and henceforth, the letter is quoted by permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library; Leeds Russian Archive, MS 1434/4.

¹³ Suffice it to mention Tony Blair, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom (1997–2007); Tilda Swinton, an Oscar-winning actress (2007); and Angus Deaton, a Nobel Prize laureate in Economics (2015).

University's Merton College (1893–97).¹⁴ Similarly, Nabokov, the eldest among his siblings, studied at Tenishev School (1910–17), one of the most respectable and innovative secondary-education institutions in his native St. Petersburg, and afterwards at Trinity College of Cambridge University (1919–22), the second-oldest British higher-education establishment and the other part of “Oxbridge.” As the focus of his studies, Burness chose Theology and Classics.¹⁵ Nabokov, while initially majoring in Zoology, “[B]y the third term of his first year [...] settled on Modern and Medieval Languages, for which two languages were required—in his case, French and Russian.”¹⁶

Burness “visited Russia in 1900” and became so fascinated with the country that shortly afterward he settled in St. Petersburg—“his address in 1902 was 88 Nevsky Prospekt.”¹⁷ While in the Russian imperial capital, Burness “was appointed English Lecturer at the Women’s University and other public schools in Petrograd [sic].”¹⁸ “[T]he Women’s University” presumably refers to the Higher Women’s Courses (*Vysshie zhenskie kursy*), also known as the Bestuzhev Courses, which were established in 1878. In Imperial Russia at the time, women were yet to be admitted to universities, and the Bestuzhev Courses were designed to fill this gap. (By comparison, in 1831, Mississippi College became the first coeducational college in the United States to grant a degree to women.) The Courses, so named after their founder and first director, a historian Konstantin Nikolaevich Bestuzhev-Riumin (1829–97), were “the largest and most prominent women’s higher education institution in Russia.”¹⁹ English language was part of their curriculum at the Historico-Philological Faculty.²⁰

¹⁴ The letter by R. C. Watt to Dr. F. Hilton. Burness “matriculated at Merton College on 21 October 1893. His degree of BA was conferred on 10 July 1897.” I am indebted for this information to Clare Button, Oxford University Archivist (electronic communication of July 17, 2008).

¹⁵ Once again, I am indebted to Clare Button for this information.

¹⁶ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 170.

¹⁷ See, respectively, Robert Burness, “Foreword” to *Perseus: A Classical Story* (London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1927), 1 [unpaginated]; and the letter by R. C. Watt to Dr. F. Hilton.

¹⁸ See Burness, “Foreword.” The use of Petrograd here is anachronistic: the Russian imperial capital was called St. Petersburg up until 1914, and only after the outbreak of World War I, in the wake of anti-German sentiments, the city’s name, which was given by Peter I in the Dutch, not the German fashion, was replaced by Petrograd, its Slavic equivalent. In 1924, after Vladimir Lenin had died, the city was renamed after him, only to regain its original appellation in 1991.

¹⁹ See Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905–1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 56.

²⁰ See È. P. Fedosova, ed. È. D. Dneprov, *Bestuzhevskie kursy—pervyi zhenskii universitet v Rossii (1878–1918 gg.)* (Moscow: “Pedagogika,” 1980), 78.

Burness resided in the Russian imperial capital as late as 1917. On April 24 of that year, he married Lilian Emily Smeaton (ca. 1876–1934) in the local English Church.²¹ “The Russian Revolution of 1917—evidently the Bolshevik coup d’état—forced him to leave the country with his wife and to return to the United Kingdom. In 1918, he obtained a commission for service in the Intelligence Department and worked in Rouen, France, until the end of the war. In 1919, the year Nabokov entered Cambridge, Burness settled in St. Leonards-on-Sea, Sussex, England, and became a private tutor [,]” apparently teaching Latin and Russian.²² Likewise, in the 1920s and throughout the 1930s in Berlin and later in Paris, Nabokov made a living, at least in part, by giving lessons in French and in English. Burness died suddenly on January 8, 1927, in St. Leonards-on-Sea at the age of 53.²³

There exist fascinating literary parallels between Nabokov and Burness. In his memoir, Nabokov correctly states that Burness translated Russian Romantic poetry. In particular, the Scott translated several poems by Pushkin, such as “Prayer” (“Molitva,” 1836), “Flower” (“Tsvetok,” 1828), and “To a Cupbearer” (“Mal’chiku,” 1832), whose original lyrics was set to music by Alexander Grechaninov.²⁴ More than twenty years later, Nabokov, too, translated into English numerous poems by Pushkin, including “I have seen again that corner of the earth” (“Vnov’ ia posetil tot ugiok zemli”), which was set to music by his cousin Nicolas Nabokov.²⁵ Burness’s most sizable Pushkin-related translation is Boris Kochno’s libretto for Stravinsky’s opera *Mavra*, based on the poet’s *Little House in Kolomna (Domik v Kolomne)*.²⁶ Nabokov’s most sizable translation of Pushkin’s work is *Eugene Onegin*. Until embarking on the translation

²¹ See <http://www.burness.ca/p528.htm#i5275>.

²² See Burness, “Foreword.”

²³ See <http://www.burness.ca/p528.htm#i5275> and anonymous, “Deaths,” *The Times*, January 12, 1927, 1.

²⁴ See A. T. Grechaninov, “Sept mélodies pour chant et piano, op. 93,” original lyrics by Alexander Pushkin, French trans. M.-D. Calvocoressi, German trans. Oskar von Riesemann, English trans. Robert Burness (Moscow: A. Gutheil, 1923–25).

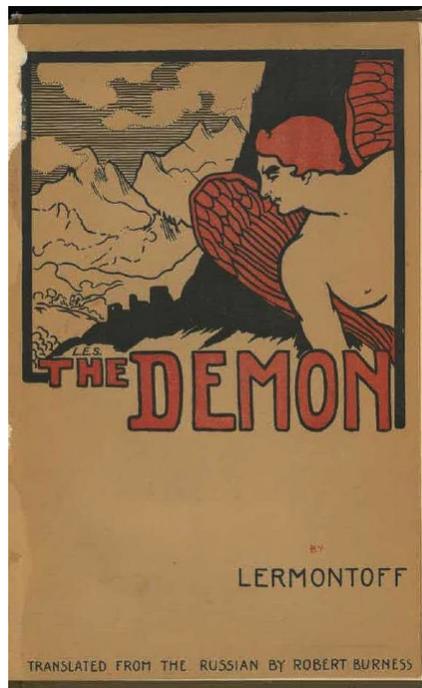
²⁵ For Pushkin’s poems in Nabokov’s translation, see Vladimir Nabokov, *Verses and Versions: Three Centuries of Russian Poetry*, ed. Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin (New York: Harcourt, 2008), 72–216. For Nabokov’s mention of his translation of the poem “I have seen again that corner of the earth...” and of it being set to music by Nicolas Nabokov, see Vladimir Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985), 52. For the poem’s text in both the original and in the writer’s English rendition, see Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 200–5.

It would have been most illuminating to compare the renditions of Burness to those of Nabokov. However, to the best of my knowledge, Burness and Nabokov never translated the same poems by Pushkin or by any other poet for that matter.

²⁶ See Igor Stravinsky, *Mavra: opéra bouffe en 1 acte*, libretto by Boris Kochno, based on Alexander Pushkin’s *Little House in Kolomna*, French trans. Jacques Larmanjat, German trans. A. Elukhen, English trans. Robert Burness (Paris: Édition russe de musique, ca. 1925).

of Pushkin's novel in verse, Nabokov like Burness before him, employed traditional practice of verse paraphrase, which was inevitably fraught with both padding and omission. Instead, in Pushkin's magnum opus, Nabokov strove for semantic precision and adopted the principle of prosaic equilinearity, or as he put it, "limited my efforts to a plain, prosy, and rhymeless translation."²⁷

Burness's best-known translation from that period is that of Mikhail Lermontov's poem *The Demon* (1839), which Nabokov calls a "romantic epic."²⁸ The translation was published in book form, "a slim paperback with a coloured cover," in 1918.²⁹ Burness defines the poem's place in Lermontov's corpus as "the most generally known" "[O]f his poetical works." He also correctly points out that *The Demon* "has not only been dramatised, but also set to music by [Anton] Rubinstein, and is to this day one of the most popular operas on the Russian stage."³⁰



III. *The Demon* by M. Lermontov in R. Burness's translation

²⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 231.

²⁸ Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse*, 4 vols., trans. from the Russian, with a Commentary, by Vladimir Nabokov, revised edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 3: 164.

²⁹ See, respectively, a letter by E. E. Sabben-Clare to Dr. F. Hilton of July 14, 1972, quoted by permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library; Leeds Russian Archive, MS 1434/2; Mikhail Lermontov, *The Demon*, trans. Robert Burness (Edinburgh: Douglas & Foulis, 1918). Judging by the artist's initials, L.E.S., the "coloured cover" was designed by Burness's wife—Lilian Emily Smeaton.

³⁰ Lermontov, *The Demon*, vii.

Incidentally, Nabokov had a low opinion of Rubinstein's opera, calling it "dreadful."³¹ While Burness neglected to mention that Mikhail Vruble dedicated a series of paintings to the poem, Nabokov held the series in high regard. The writer further remarked that "[A] great painter treated his 'Demon' in quite a different way and in terms of such peacock colors amid diamond-blazing eyes and purple clouds that Lermontov's genius ought to sleep content."³² Nabokov's own oeuvre, specifically *Ada* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, contains references to both Lermontov's poem and Vruble's series.³³ In particular, *Ada* includes an allusion to Lermontov's *Demon* by way of the reference to "Lermontov's diamond-faceted tetrameters" and the parodic translation of the first four lines of the poem's third chapter (*Ada* 171 and 502).³⁴ Like Burness before him, Nabokov translated Lermontov's poetry.³⁵ In 1958, precisely forty years after Burness translated *The Demon*, Nabokov also translated and published Lermontov's prose masterpiece, *A Hero of Our Time*, which Burness characterized as "the most typical" "[O]f his prose works."³⁶

In addition to Pushkin and Lermontov, both Burness and Nabokov tried their hand at rendering Heinrich Heine's poetry. Burness translated into English Heine's "From my tears sprout" ("Aus meinen Tränen sprießen"), set to music by Anatoly Lyadov. He also translated Heine's two romances, "On your snow-white bosom" ("Auf deinen schneeweißen Busen") and "When I look into your eyes" ("Wenn ich in deine Augen seh"), which were set to music by Alexander Glazunov. In translating Heine's poems, Burness did not use their German originals but rather their Russian adaptations by Nikolai Artsybushev, Nikolai Dobroliubov, and Mikhail Mikhailov, respectively.³⁷

³¹ See Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 274.

³² See Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 274.

³³ See Gavriel Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 128.

³⁴ See Brian Boyd, ADAonline <http://www.ada.auckland.ac.nz>.

³⁵ Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 278–98.

³⁶ See Mi[k]hail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov in collaboration with Dmitri Nabokov (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958); Lermontov, *The Demon*, vii.

³⁷ See, respectively, Anatoly Lyadov, "Quatre mélodies avec accompagnement de piano, op. 1," French trans. M.-D. Calvocoressi, English trans. Robert Burness (Petrograd: W. Bessel, ca. 1914); Alexander Glazunov, "Cinq mélodies avec accompagnement de piano," French trans. M.-D. Calvocoressi, English trans. Robert Burness (St. Petersburg: W. Bessel, ca. 1908).

In 1918, while in Crimea, the young Nabokov was asked by “a Russian contralto—who, incidentally, wanted the musically significant vowels to coincide in fullness of sound” to convey into Russian some of Heine’s poems, set to music by Franz Schubert and Robert Schumann.³⁸ Nabokov “acquitted himself so well that at the concert both the singer and the translator received ovations, and the next day in Yalta people were ringing up to obtain the words. His version of ‘Ich grolle nicht’ was particularly successful.”³⁹ Nabokov recalls that he “turned *Ich grolle nicht* into *Net, zloby net*, instead of the unsingable old version *Ya ne serzhus’*.”⁴⁰

Burness also translated contemporary poetry, and in particular five poems by Anna Akhmatova: “The gray-eyed king” (“Seroglazyi korol’,” 1910), “Remembrance of the sun grows dimmer in the heart” (“Pamiat’ o solntse v serdtse slabeet,” 1911), “Greetings” (“Zdravstvui,” 1913), “Sunlight filled the room” (“Solntse komnatu napolnilo,” 1913), and “True tenderness cannot be confused...” (“Nastoiashchuiu nezhnost’ ne sputaesh’...,” 1913), set to music by Sergei Prokofiev in 1916.⁴¹ Likewise, Nabokov translated into English works by contemporary Russian poets—Alexander Blok, Vladislav Khodasevich, and Osip Mandelstam, among others.⁴² In addition to Akhmatova, Burness translated two poems, both dated 1909, by Konstantin Balmont, “The forget-me-not” (“Nezabudochka”) and “The dove” (“Golub”), set to music by Igor Stravinsky; as well as his “The jimson weed” (“Durman,” 1914), set to music by Nicolas Tcherepnine.⁴³ Although Nabokov never translated the original poetry by Balmont, the latter as a translator constitutes a peculiar case in Nabokov’s literary legacy. In a missive to Edmund Wilson of April 29, 1941, Nabokov writes that Sergei Rachmaninov approached him to retranslate “Balmont’s reckless translation of Edgar Poe’s ‘The Bells.’ But as the Edgar Poem

³⁸ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 189. According to Stanislav Shvabrin, Nabokov errs here: the singer, Anna Yan-Ruban, was not a contralto, but rather a soprano; see Stanislav Shvabrin, “Nabokov and Heine,” *Russian Literature* 74, 3–4 (2013), 372.

³⁹ Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 145.

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 189. For a discussion of Nabokov’s rendition of “Ich grolle nicht” as well as numerous other poems by Heine, see Shvabrin, “Nabokov and Heine,” 363–416.

⁴¹ Sergei Prokofiev, “Cinq poésies d’Anna Akhmatova, op. 27,” French trans. Louis Laloy, German trans. Vera Miller and B.S., English trans. Robert Burness (Moscow: A. Gutheil, 1925).

⁴² See, respectively, Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 332–35, 340–51, and 356–57.

⁴³ Igor Stravinsky, “Deux poésies de K. Balmont,” German trans. Berthold Feiwel, French trans. M.-D. Calvocoressi, English trans. Robert Burness (Paris: Édition russe de musique, ca. 1915); Nicolas Tcherepnine, “Amaryllis: deux esquisses pour chant et piano: op. 49,” original lyrics by Konstantin Balmont, French trans. Louis Laloy, English trans. Robert Burness (Paris: W. Bessel, ca. 1920).

does not fit the music I am supposed to re-shuffle the thing according to Balmont's drivel."⁴⁴ Nabokov further writes that in reversing "Balmont's drivel" into English, he "was solely concerned"—and so apparently was Rachmaninov who commissioned the work—"with finding English words that would sound like the Russian ones."⁴⁵

Besides being an expert translator of Russian poetry, Robert Burness composed original literary works. Thus, he penned a travelogue, "From Moscow to Mukden," based on his journey in the summer of 1903 from St. Petersburg, where, the alliterative title notwithstanding, he began his travel across the country, to the capital of Manchuria, presently known as Shenyang. Burness's travelogue contains many curious ethnographic observations of the turn of the twentieth century. Of specific interest are his remarks about the religiosity of Russian peasantry and the description of a Chinese village school and its mores.

In particular, Burness comments that no village in Russia, even a small hamlet, stands without a church or a chapel, and describes the ways their construction was financed:

All through Russia and Siberia there is no hamlet so insignificant but it has its church or chapel with a green or yellow dome. The church may be built by some rich landlord who owns the requisite site and is prepared to build the church at his own cost. Otherwise this duty falls on the peasants themselves. It may happen that they have not the necessary funds. In this case one or more of their number are chosen and sent to the towns to beg. The traveller in St. Petersburg may often see a peasant in sheepskin patiently standing at some street corner with a tray projecting from his breast fastened by cords round his neck. Above the tray or box is a crude picture of the Virgin or one of the Saints. Such men may be met with every day. They are not ordinary beggars. They are never obtrusive and are very grateful for the smallest trifle. One seldom sees more than copper in their trays. Sometimes a passer-by will drop in a small piece of silver and take

⁴⁴ Simon Karlinsky, ed., *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov—Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, revised and expanded version (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 50.

⁴⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Translation," in *Verses and Versions*, 7. For a detailed history of Nabokov's collaboration with Rachmaninov on "The Bells," see Yuri Leving, "Singing *The Bells* and *The Covetous Knight*: Nabokov and Rachmaninoff's Operatic Translations of Poe and Pushkin," in *Transitional Nabokov*, ed. Will Norman and Duncan White (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 205–13.

out change. This poor sheep-skinned mujik has probably come a long distance—we in England do not understand what distance means—and probably he has come under great difficulties. But he is justly proud of the mission on which he has come and of the task his fellow villagers have entrusted to him. He does not consider his village complete without a church. Instances such as these serve to show the character of a nation, as well as that of an individual.⁴⁶

In light of this description, the success of the Bolshevik dictatorship only fifteen-odd years later in if not entirely eradicating religiosity, at least in severely suppressing this unique practice of the Russian people, is all the more ominous. It serves as a grim testimony to the ability of a totalitarian regime to undermine the country's fabric and the nation's character.

No less enlightening is Burness's depiction of the Chinese village school, and specifically the daily conduct of its schoolmaster and of his pupils:

On another occasion I had an opportunity of inspecting the village school. The entrance would be strongly objected to by the fastidious English schoolboy. Through the main street we passed into a yard where two savage dogs ran at us and had to be driven off. Then at the schoolroom door lay three or four large black pigs in a pool of black mud. Stepping over one of these we entered the school house. The room was of moderate dimensions and all around was a mud erection spread with carpets made of rushes. It was like the arrangement of a Chinese bed only much broader. Placed round this at regular intervals were small desks and at each desk sat three boys cross-legged like tailors. On the level ground under this erection all the scholars lay their shoes which they take off before mounting to their seats. The schoolmaster sat near the door with his belongings: a brush, a pipe, and a fan. He did not seem much surprised at our visit but his pupils regarded us with great wonder. Upon our errand being interpreted he rose and gave us his own place. The silence in the school in place of the noise we expected was now

⁴⁶ See Robert Burness, "From Moscow to Mukden," 4–5. Here and henceforth, the text is quoted by permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library; Leeds Russian Archive, MS 1434/1.

explained. It was the time for rest. Some were lying on their backs asleep in their places, but most were reading their lessons to themselves and apparently from their gestures and pointing were making remarks about us. Through our interpreter who conversed long with the master we learned that his salary was about seven roubles a year but that he sometimes received more. He is allowed to thrash his pupils unmercifully, but all his former pupils are considered under an obligation to him and sometimes give him presents of money or food. The books used in the school were of rough brown paper, each page being divided into squares in which they copied the Chinese characters. The pens they use are fine brushes which they blacken with paint kept in little boxes. The schoolmaster told us that the rest of that day would be devoted to preparation and that we should presently hear them prepare. When the order was given to begin preparation a noise ensued which would have driven any English master mad. All the pupils at once began to recite at the top of their voices, swaying their heads and bodies to and fro. Each boy was obliged to shout his loudest, else the voice of his neighbour reading from a different part of the book would drown his own. Each was obliged to sway his hardest to avoid a violent blow from his neighbour's head. [...] This preparation lasts some hours and the noise never abates. The school opens at sunrise and lasts all day. There are no holidays except the New Year. The schoolboy's life is like that of Mr. Gilbert's policeman "not a happy one."⁴⁷

Burness's observations of the Chinese village school and its regimen are especially informative and instructive not only because the Scott himself received rigorous schooling in the United Kingdom — hence his reference to "the fastidious English schoolboy" — but also because teaching was Burness's own main occupation. Thus his remark about the ensued noise "which would have driven any English master mad." Furthermore, Burness's travelogue brings to mind Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev's expeditions to Asia, and specifically to China, and their description in *The Gift*.

⁴⁷ Burness, "From Moscow to Mukden," 84–86. The locution in quotation marks is a reference to the policeman's song from W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan's opera *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879) which contains the line "A policeman's lot is not a happy one."

In addition to translating Russian and West European poetry and penning the travelogue, Burness composed a verse of his own: a long poem, entitled *Perseus*, has survived and was published posthumously. Here is an excerpt from Part I of this poem, written primarily in blank verse:

There reigned at Argos, by the silver sea,
A King, Acrisius, widowed ere his prime,
Father of one fair daughter, Danae,
Whom much he loved, beholding when she smiled
Another's likeness, one who long had passed
Into the silence of the After-Death,
Leaving him to the loneliness of Kings,
Sole ruler on a melancholy throne.⁴⁸

This passage evokes the motifs of “a lonesome king” and of “a principedom/kingdom by the sea,” the latter by way of Edgar Allan Poe’s ballad “Annabel Lee,” familiar from such works by Nabokov as “Solus Rex,” *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*.

The Foreword to the poem suggests that Burness was “a classical scholar of real distinction,” and indeed, the poem demonstrates his great penchant for and considerable expertise in the field. Here is a brief but perceptive appraisal of the poem:

Mr. Burness, who wrote *Perseus* [...], had a true faculty for tact of phrasing and variety of cadence. His poem is clearly told. Narrative is always difficult to handle, especially when it is interrupted by lyrics; but Mr. Burness’s management is extremely skillful. *Perseus* is after the style of Tennyson; but is no mere imitation. It is the poem of a scholar, with an excellent ear, and what is rarer in a scholarly poet, a true dramatic vision.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Robert Burness, *Perseus: A Classical Story* (London and Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1927), 2. I am greatly indebted to Andrew Murray, Fettes College Archivist, for placing a copy of the poem at my disposal.

⁴⁹ Anon., “Some Books of the Week,” *The Spectator*, February 16, 1929, 21.

It appears that while teaching English to Nabokov, Robert Burness inculcated in the boy an early interest in the art of limerick. Nabokov describes limerick in his Russian memoir, by way of the comparable Russian popular folk genre, as “a kind of five-line *chastushka* with a highly strict form.”⁵⁰ (*Chastushka*, to which Nabokov refers here, is a humorous four-line rhymed Russian ditty.) Nabokov reminisces that it became a tradition for Mr. Burness to end the lessons with the future novelist by squeezing the boy’s hand “he held in his beefy paw” harder and harder, while reciting the limerick “There was a young lady from Russia,” until “the pain would have become so excruciating” as to preclude the ritual from going any farther than the third line.⁵¹ The limerick, to which Nabokov alludes here, was composed by Edward Lear (1812–88), an English artist, illustrator and writer, known for his clever literary nonsense, and reads as follows:

There was a Young Lady of Russia,
Who screamed so that no one could hush her;
Her screams were extreme,
No one heard such a scream,
As was screamed by that lady of Russia.

Nabokov was perhaps the first to provide a Russian rendition of this limerick:

Есть странная дама из Кракова:
орет от пожатия всякого,
орет наперед
и все время орет —
но орет не всегда одинаково.⁵²

⁵⁰ See Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 5: 198.

⁵¹ Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 90.

⁵² Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 5: 198; also see Boris Arkhitektsev, comp. and introd., “Edvard Lir [Edward Lear]. There was a Young Lady of Russia,” *Inostrannaia literatura* 3 (2003): 220.

In reverse literal translation, Nabokov's rendition of Lear's limerick reads as follows:

There is a strange lady from Cracow:
she screams from every squeeze.
She screams beforehand,
and screams all the time,
but not always screams the same way.

Nabokov's fascination with limerick continued throughout his life. It finds its expression in the following two examples which the writer composed in 1953, that is, more than two score years after his lessons with Robert Burness and about the same time he translated "The Young Lady of Russia" which he included in his Russian memoir. The first limerick was written as part of a humorous exchange with Morris Bishop, Cornell University Professor of French and Italian:

The old man who devised the Roomette
Now in Hades is bedded, I'll bet:
To make water, his bed
He must prop on his head—
—A ridiculous doom, or doomette.

The second limerick was also addressed to Morris Bishop:

There was a house builder Jimmy Ricks,
Who built houses for makers of limericks,
But because of a stutter
B's he tries not to utter,

And when asking for bricks would say “Gimme ‘ricks.”⁵³

Both limericks demonstrate that Nabokov was very much at home with this poetic form and occasionally used it in good-humored epistolary exchanges with his colleague and friend at Cornell.

Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* contains an allusion to Sir Walter Scott in Kinbote’s reference to his tutor, “a Scotsman” Walter Campbell.⁵⁴ The allusion is amplified when Kinbote recalls that his tutor “used to call any old tumble-down building ‘a hurley-house’.”⁵⁵ It is noteworthy that the Scottish writer employed the locution throughout his *Waverley* novel series. Thus, it appears in such works as *Waverley; or, ‘Tis Sixty Years Since* (1814) in the phrase “I could have left Rose the auld hurley-house, and the riggs belonging to it”; in *The Legend of Montrose* (1819): “I must needs say, was done more like an ignorant Highland cateran, who has not sense enough to erect a sconce for the protection of his old hurley-house of a castle, than like a soldier of worth and quality”; and in *The Pirate* (1822): “Here is a fine old hurley-house you have found out for an owl to hide himself in at mid-day, or a ghost to revisit the pale glimpses of the moon.”⁵⁶ In addition, and more pertinent to the subject of this article, the reference to Kinbote’s tutor, “a Scotsman” Walter Campbell, may be seen as Nabokov’s tribute to his own tutor. For the sake of concealment, Nabokov replaced the surname of his tutor and the original namesake of the Scottish national poet, Robert Burns, with the surname of another prominent Scottish poet and the bard’s younger contemporary, Thomas Campbell. Incidentally, Nabokov re-translated Campbell’s poem *Lord Ullin’s Daughter* into English from its Vasily Zhukovsky’s Russian rendition and included both in a handout for his Cornell Russian literature survey course in translation. Nabokov also mentions Campbell and *Lord Ullin’s Daughter* in his commentary to

⁵³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989), 141–42.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 100.

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, 100–1.

⁵⁶ See John Jamieson, *Scottish Dictionary and Supplement*, 4 vols. Edinburgh: William Tait, 1841, 1: 606. Jamieson explains that it is “A term applied to a large house, that is so much in disrepair as to be nearly in a ruinous state” (ibid.). Nabokov’s allusion to *The Pirate* was originally noted by Matthew Roth; see his “An Allusion to Sir Walter Scott’s *The Pirate* in *Pale Fire*,” The Vladimir Nabokov Forum, April 27, 2007.

Eugene Onegin. In addition, he alludes to the ballad in *Lolita* class list by way of the title heroine's classmate Alice Campbell.⁵⁷

In conclusion, Robert Burness was undoubtedly a gifted pedagogue. He built a solid foundation for Nabokov's proficiency in the English language that served the future writer in good stead a decade later when he matriculated at Cambridge University and began writing in English. It is clear that Burness also inculcated in Nabokov the fascination with limerick that Nabokov occasionally practiced almost half a century later. It is most regrettable that Nabokov learned about Burness being a prolific translator of Russian poetry only after his teacher's passing and did not interact with him in the 1910s and the early 1920s while both were residing in St. Petersburg and in the United Kingdom. In any case, it is intriguing to observe, as I attempted to show, most enthralling biographical parallels as well as cultural intersections and affinities between this Scottish man of letters and his one-time pupil, the Russian-American writer of world renown.

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⁵⁷ See Gavriel Shapiro, "Nabokov's Re-Translation of Southey's Ballad in Zhukovsky's Rendition," *The Nabokovian* 73 (Fall 2014): 32. For all three texts, see Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 52–57. For Nabokov's mention of Campbell and the ballad in *Eugene Onegin*, see Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, 2: 255 and 3: 34. For a discussion of an allusion to Campbell's ballad by way of the *Lolita* class list, see Gavriel Shapiro, "Lolita Class List," *Cahiers du Monde russe* 37 (1996): 319.

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