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FOLLOWING DARWIN'S FOOTSTEPS

*Some comments on Vladimir Nabokov's Glory,
with special reference to the creation of the character of Darwin,
and with notes on undergraduate life at Trinity College, Cambridge,
during Nabokov's student years*

In his introduction to the English translation of *Podvig (Glory)*, dated 8 December 1970, Montreux, and published by Penguin, Nabokov stated that Darwin was not based on anyone, though some of the other characters were. “As to Martin’s Cambridge friends, Darwin is totally invented... but ‘Vadim’ and ‘Teddy’ existed in the reality of my Cambridge past; they are mentioned under their initials, N.R. and R.C., respectively, in my *Speak, Memory* (1966, Chapter Thirteen, penult paragraph).” In his ultimate paragraph of the introduction Nabokov warns off his “wise reader” from cross-referencing *Speak, Memory* and *Glory*, although he himself has done exactly that!¹

Disobeying Nabokov, on reading page 201 of *Speak, Memory*, we find that five students are mentioned by initials only; the third is P.M. In more than one context Nabokov has identified “P.M.” as Peter Mrosovsky, the friend who smuggled a copy of James Joyce’s banned *Ulysses* from Paris, and read passages aloud to him at Trinity.²

After the death of Mrosovsky’s widow in 2000, among her effects, which included hitherto inaccessible family papers, was found a first edition Russian copy of *Glory*, with the following dedication:

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), pp. 201-02.

² Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory* (London: Penguin Classics, 2011), p. 88.

for Peter Mrosovsky

a bit of which forms an ingredient in Дарвинъ [Darwin]

Vladimir Nabokov

Sept. 27, 1971

Montreux

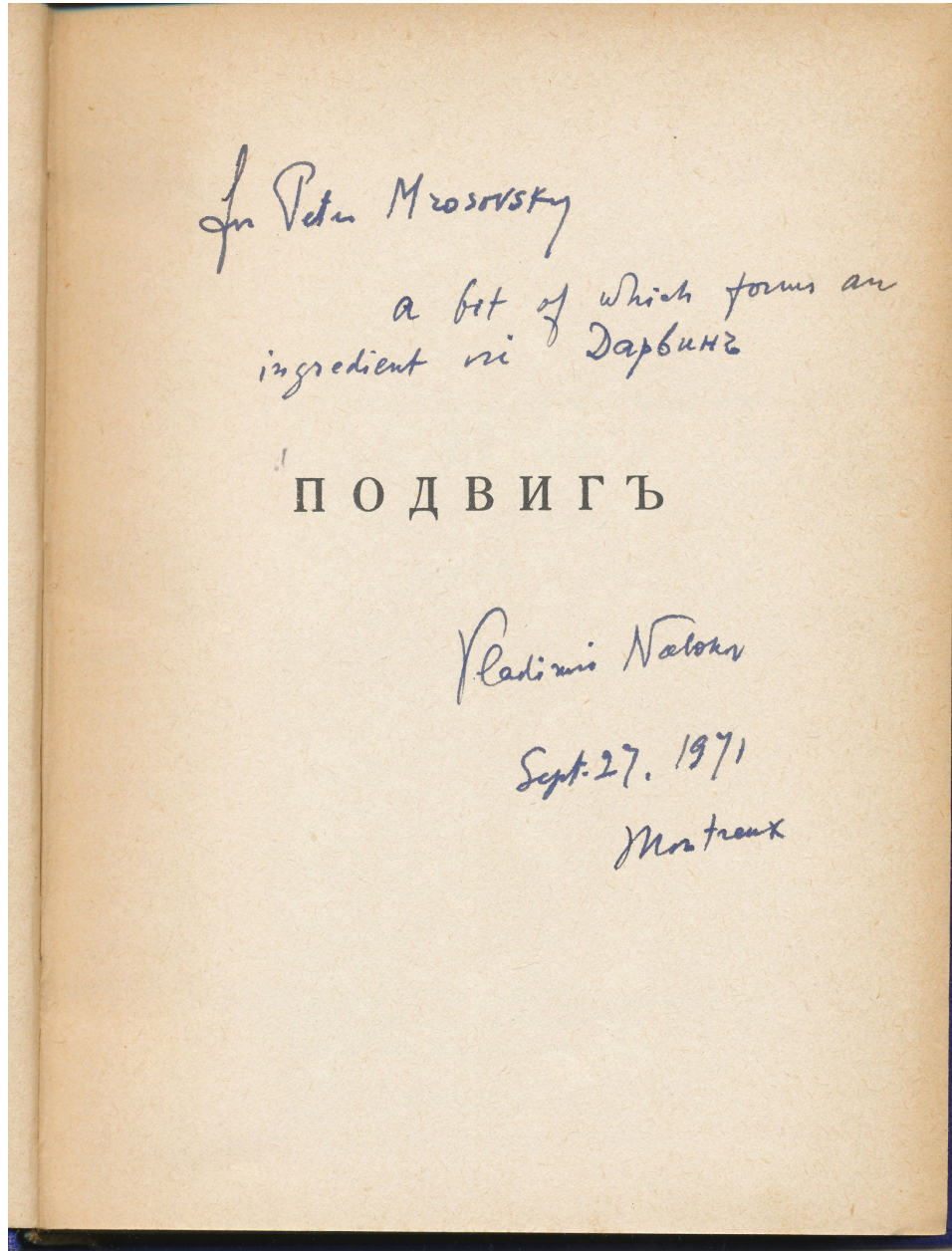


Fig.1. Nabokov's inscription in Mrosovsky's Russian copy of *Glory*.

The author's archive.

The primary purpose of this article is to examine Nabokov's creation of the character Darwin. Reference will be made to the text of *Glory* itself, and to known biographical details about Nabokov and Mrosovsky. This may allow a glimpse of Nabokov's creative forces at work and bring to life the period in which the novel was set. Before embarking on this task it is sobering to recall the following comment by J.R.R. Tolkien who wrote in his forward to the 1966 edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

An author cannot of course remain wholly unaffected by his experience, but the ways in which a story-germ uses the soil of experience are extremely complex, and attempts to define the process are at best guesses from evidence that is inadequate and ambiguous.³

The sources for this article are:

- 1) *Glory* itself;
- 2) Family papers and correspondence, mainly Peter Mrosovsky's letters from Cambridge;
- 3) *The Trinity Magazine*, a contemporary undergraduate publication.

WHAT DID DARWIN LOOK LIKE?

Darwin is first described as a "large, sleepy-looking Englishman in a canary-yellow jumper, who sprawled in an armchair" smoking a pipe. "His eyes were pale bluish, vacant and expressionless".⁴ Later in the novel in the 'duel' passage, Darwin takes off his shirt, "exposing a massive pink torso with a muscular gloss at the shoulders and a path of golden hairs down the middle of his broad chest."⁵

Mrosovsky was tall, 6ft 2', slow in his movements, and had hazel brown eyes and wavy dark hair. He was an almost life-long pipe and cigarette smoker, and in retirement

³ Tolkien, J.R.R. 'Forward,' *The Fellowship of the Ring* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), p. 7.

⁴ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Glory*, trans. Dmitri & Vladimir Nabokov (London: Penguin, 1974), p. 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

his family home was provided with ‘loungers’, big ‘club sized’ armchairs. He possessed, and wore sometimes, an old yellow jersey. Reversing the hair and eye colour is consistent with Nabokov’s love of opposites, especially as he wants to create an image of a blonde Anglo-Saxon Englishman.

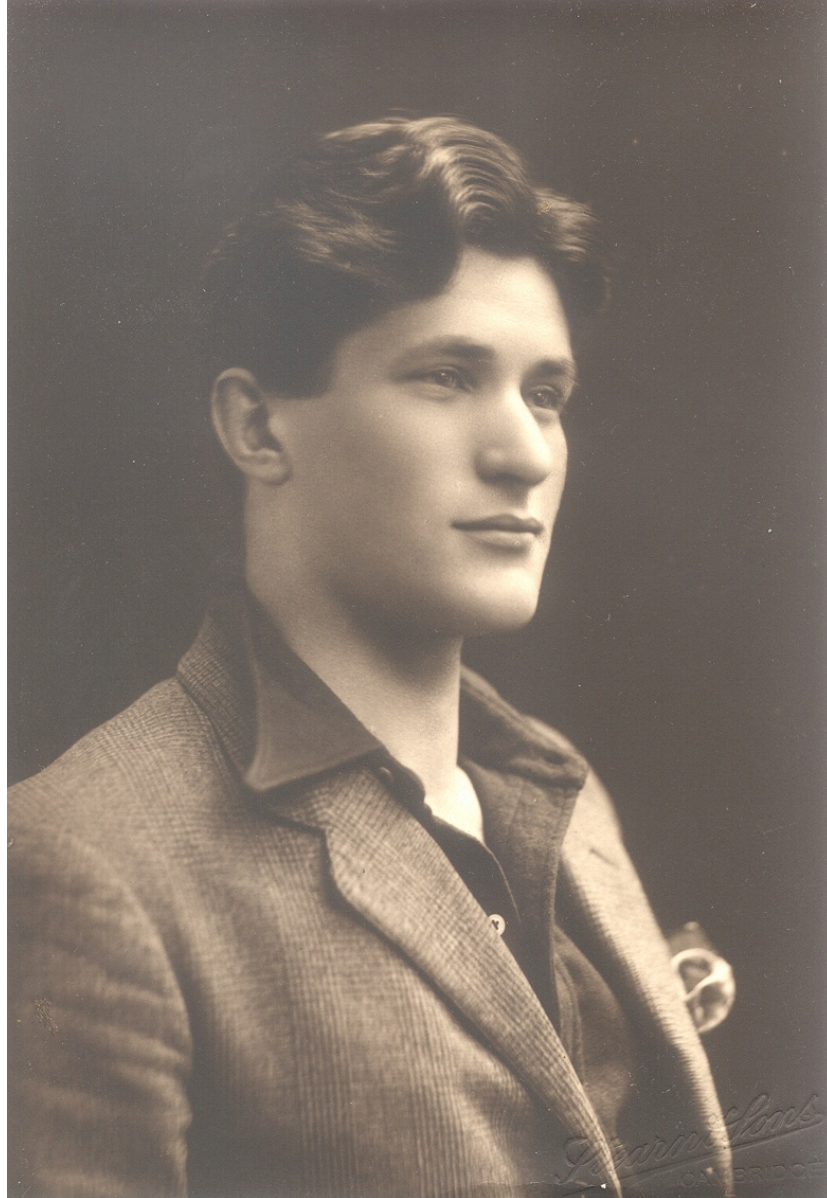


Fig. 2. Photo of Mrosovsky at Cambridge, 1922.

WHAT WAS DARWIN'S EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND?

Darwin and Teddy, we learn, are Etonians. This is true of the real life Teddy, Robert de Calry, but not of Mrosovsky, who went to the 'avant-garde' school, Bedales. Nabokov is creating a typically English type. An analysis of the schools attended by the 213 students of Nabokov's and Mrosovsky's Trinity College Cambridge entry year shows that there are more from Eton (28) than from any other school. Nabokov was the only one from the also 'progressive' Tenishev school in St. Petersburg, and he is listed with two end spellings of his name, 'ov' and 'off?' for the roll. Mrosovsky was the only one from Bedales. The only other Petersburgian in the same year, Kalashnikov, listed as Michel De Kalashnicoff, attended a more traditional school, the Lyceum of Emperor Alexander I.

WHAT WAS DARWIN'S FAMILY BACKGROUND?

Not much is said except that "he had spent his childhood in Madeira and Hawaii and that his father was a famous admiral."⁶

It is known that Mrosovsky travelled a great deal in his childhood and youth outside his native Russia. The family had military connections. Mrosovsky's mother, Varvara Grigorevna Kovalensky, was the daughter of Lieutenant-General Grigori Grigorevich Kovalensky (awarded the Order of St. Vladimir 2nd class at the end of the Crimean War for commissariat duties at the Siege of Kars, 1856). Varvara's mother was Catherine Schabelsky. A paternal uncle, General Iosif Ivanovich Mrosovsky, had a distinguished career in the Russian artillery, and served as military governor of Moscow at the time of the October Revolution.⁷

⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

⁷ Trotsky, Leon. *The History of the Russian Revolution*, trans. Max Eastman (London: Victor Gollancz, 1934).

WHAT WAS DARWIN'S WAR RECORD?

According to Nabokov, he is a war hero: “Three years in the trenches, France and Mesopotamia, the Victoria Cross, and not a scratch either morally or physically.”⁸

Both Nabokov and Mrosovsky were of the generation who just missed joining up. Early in 1919, Nabokov had made up his mind to enlist in the White Army following the example of his cousin Yuri Rausch, already serving.⁹ Tragically, Yuri was killed in action shortly after. Not long after Yuri's death, Sebastopol fell to the Bolsheviks: from there Nabokov and his family were evacuated, just in time, by boat.

Mrosovsky never enlisted either, but it was not for lack of trying. There does exist confirmation of his registering in London, on his 18th birthday, to enlist in the British Army, having passed the health check with A1 rating. There is also a subsequent letter from the War Office stating that Russian nationals could not be accepted into the Forces.

Mrosovsky, too, suffered a bereavement similar to Nabokov's loss of his cousin Yuri. A slightly older school friend, David McConel, who joined the Air Force and became a pilot, was killed in a flying accident in fog, shortly after the Armistice, in December 1918. It was McConel's parents who paid Mrosovsky's college fees in memory of their son. We are told that Nabokov's mother had to sell some family pearls to pay his college fees.¹⁰

Mrosovsky's only ‘war work’ was civil, as an employee of the American Red Cross in Rome, 1918 to 1919. Darwin's war record, by contrast, is idealized, the Victoria Cross being the highest award for bravery in the British Army.

WHAT WAS DARWIN'S LITERARY CAREER?

This is idealized, too. Darwin's success as an author is spoken of in the same breath as his distinguished war record — he had “interrupted his college studies at 18 to enlist.”¹¹

⁸ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 62.

⁹ Boyd, Brian. *The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 158.

¹⁰ Boyd, *The Russian Years*, p. 165.

¹¹ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 62.

Aside from the undercurrent in *Glory* of a sense of failure in the young men who had not enlisted (see the passage in *Glory* where both Martin and his mother imagine that he had joined the White Army),¹² part of the aftermath of World War I was a sense of grief for the lost British war poets, of whom Rupert Brooke became their icon. Nabokov wrote a critique in Russian of Rupert Brooke, including translations of some of his poems.

Darwin is portrayed as an established and successful writer, albeit of prose, though the first work he offers Martin to read, “A Complete Description of Sixty-Seven Ways of Getting Inside Trinity College after Closing of the Gates etc.”,¹³ makes it hard to regard Darwin as a serious author (i.e. why ‘67’?)

In real life Mrosovsky was not a writer — he read chemistry. Surely it is no accident that Nabokov chose to call this important character Darwin, a name that resonates science (the naturalist Charles Darwin enrolled at Christ’s College, Cambridge in 1827). However Mrosovsky was not lacking in literary culture. As a boarder at Bedales, with no family in England, the school holidays were a problem, especially during World War I, so between 1914 and 1916 he was fostered by the poet Edward Thomas and his wife Helen. Thomas and Rupert Brooke both belonged to the same poetry movement, ‘The Georgians,’ and were personal friends.¹⁴ In August 1914, Mrosovsky, then aged 14, went down to Millwall Docks in London to take up his passage by boat to Russia for the summer holidays, but the ship did not sail owing to Germany’s declaration of war on Russia (19 July 1914, Russian calendar). Mrosovsky returned to the Thomas family at Steep (the location of Bedales School), who took him on holiday to Gloucestershire. There Edward Thomas met up with a group called ‘The Dimmock Poets’ who were joined by the American poet Robert Frost. Thomas had previously been a literary critic and prose writer, whose main subject was the countryside. Frost became a close friend and was highly influential in encouraging Thomas to start writing poetry.

¹² Ibid., pp. 97-98.

¹³ Ibid., p. 62. All colleges were in Nabokov’s time single sex and remained so till quite recently. Students were expected to be back in college before the gates were locked in the evening for the night.

¹⁴ Hollis, Matthew. *All Roads Lead to France* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), pp. 67-69.

Thomas's output lasted only a short time: he enlisted in 1915 and was killed by a shell at Arras in April 1917.

When Mrosovsky volunteered in 1918, he chose the same regiment as his foster father had first been in, The Artists' Rifles, and he kept up with the Thomas family for the rest of his life. In Edward Thomas's letter the 'Russian boy' is mentioned reading Baroness Orczy (one of a number of English authors in Nabokov's family library in St. Petersburg) and "swinging his feet" in a way that got on Thomas's nerves. Mrosovsky's purchase of a first edition copy of *Ulysses* (No.184 of 1000) in Paris shows he was not completely out of touch with the literary scene.

WHAT WAS DARWIN'S PERSONALITY?

WHAT PHYSICAL IMPRESSION DID HE GIVE?

Darwin is portrayed as older than the hero of the novel, Martin, and more worldly-wise. In a significant passage in *Glory*, introducing Martin's new friend to the reader, Nabokov wrote: "Martin got the impression that Darwin had already been at the university some years."¹⁵ Darwin spells out some of the sartorial and behavioural traditions that Martin should know about. In real life Nabokov and Mrosovsky, both Petersburgians, were close coevals, Mrosovsky, born 17 January 1900, being slightly younger. They entered Trinity at the same time, October 1919. However, Mrosovsky had been in England from 1912 to 1917 as a boarder at Bedales, and so had more opportunity to observe and assimilate English customs. Their childhood experiences, however, had been rather different. Nabokov had a stable home life, despite his father's imprisonment for liberal activities, until the escape of the whole family from the revolution. Mrosovsky's was disrupted, without any settled family home. After his infancy in St. Petersburg, from the age of two Mrosovsky travelled constantly in Italy and Sicily, returning to St. Petersburg from time to time, notably in 1907, and between 1911 and 1912. From England he went twice for his summer holidays to St. Petersburg in 1915 and 1916, when he got his Russian passport. Mrosovsky also spent nearly three years, aged 7 to 10, as a boarder at the *Collegio Nazareno* in Rome, a Catholic boys' boarding school run by monks.

¹⁵ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 61.

Nabokov, in his preface to *Glory*, referring to difficulties in translation, mentions “The very Russian preoccupations with physical movement and gesture especially strong in *Podvig*.”¹⁶ Darwin demonstrates this well; for example by “the soles [of his shoes] that he always exhibited, fond as he was of semi-reclining poses with his feet lodged in some high, comfortable position, [which] were equipped with a complicated system of rubber strips.”¹⁷ Perhaps these are the very kind of shoes that Darwin wore on his visit of condolence to Martin’s family at the end of the book: “The rubber soles of his sturdy shoes left patterned impressions on the dark soil in front of the wicket. These footprints slowly filled with water...”¹⁸ “Everything about him, from those solidly shod feet to his bony nose, was high-quality, large, and imperturbable.”¹⁹ The word ‘bony’ translates the Russian, ‘nosatii’. Mrosovsky’s Cambridge photo, above, shows his nose as Roman rather than Grecian.

In a later chapter, Nabokov writes: “the door was pushed open. At first a foot appeared, then, laden with goodies, Darwin entered. He tried to close the door with his foot but dropped a paper sack out of which tumbled meringues”²⁰; Darwin’s manner of dealing with a door by using his foot when his hands are fully laden is idiosyncratic, as is the description of Darwin, at Liverpool Street station, balancing a stranger’s trunk on his nape.²¹

ARE THERE ANY CLUES THAT THESE ARE MEMORIES OF MROSOVSKY?

Here is some evidence of Mrosovsky’s body language: Nabokov, in a 1946 letter to Mrosovsky, writes: “I was awfully glad to hear from you. I still have somewhere that photo of you standing on one leg on a pony. You used to be able to kick the lintel of my door in Trinity Lane.” This pony photo was found in Mrosovsky’s family papers:

¹⁶ Nabokov, ‘Forward’, *Glory*, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.



Fig. 3. Mrosovsky standing on a horse in Mexico, late 1920s.

Garb, if not posture, similar to that of the riders in fig. 4:

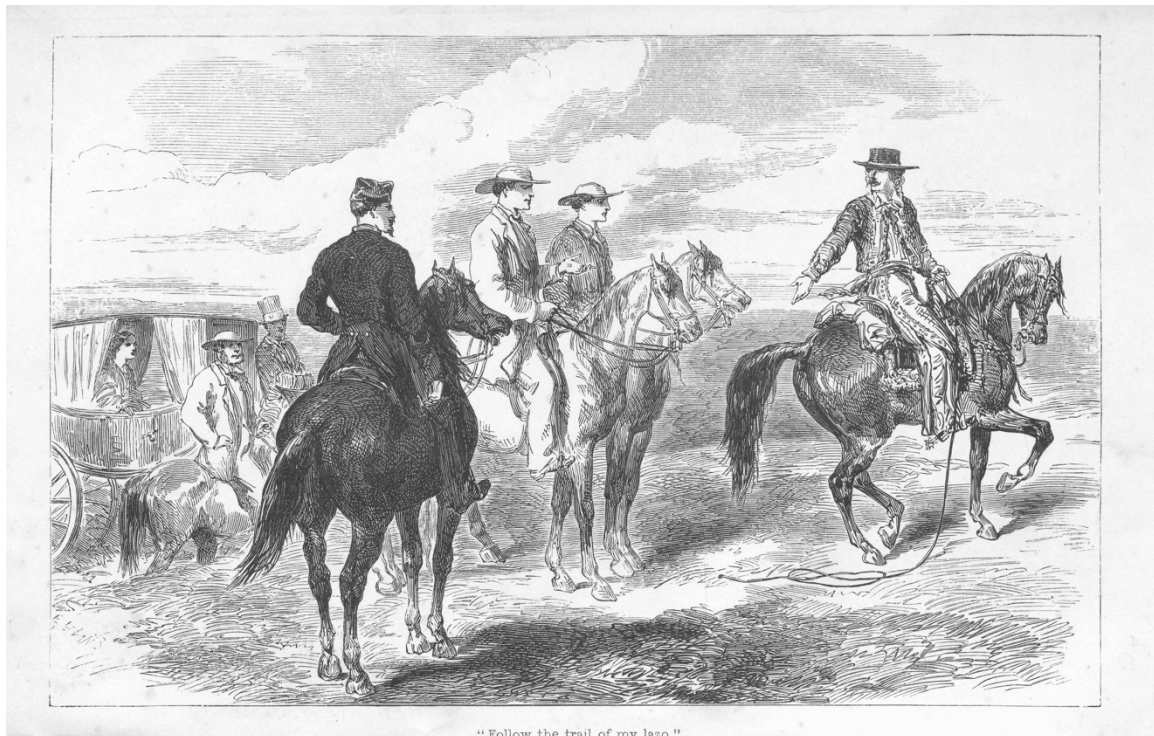


Fig. 4. From Captain Mayne Reid, *The Headless Horseman*.

Some significant features of the plot of *Glory* have no corroboration from real life, e.g. whether Nabokov and Mrosovsky, like ‘Martin’ and ‘Darwin,’ were ever rivals for the same girl (‘Sonia’), or ever fought each other in physical combat.²² Nor is there any evidence that Mrosovsky, like Darwin on his birthday, pulled the communication cord on a train and got off without a fine (then the enormous sum of £5). There is, however, photographic evidence suggesting that the description of how Darwin carried a stranger’s trunk at Liverpool Street station could be based on Nabokov’s observation of Mrosovsky.²³

²² Ibid., p. 115-116.

²³ Ibid., p. 94.

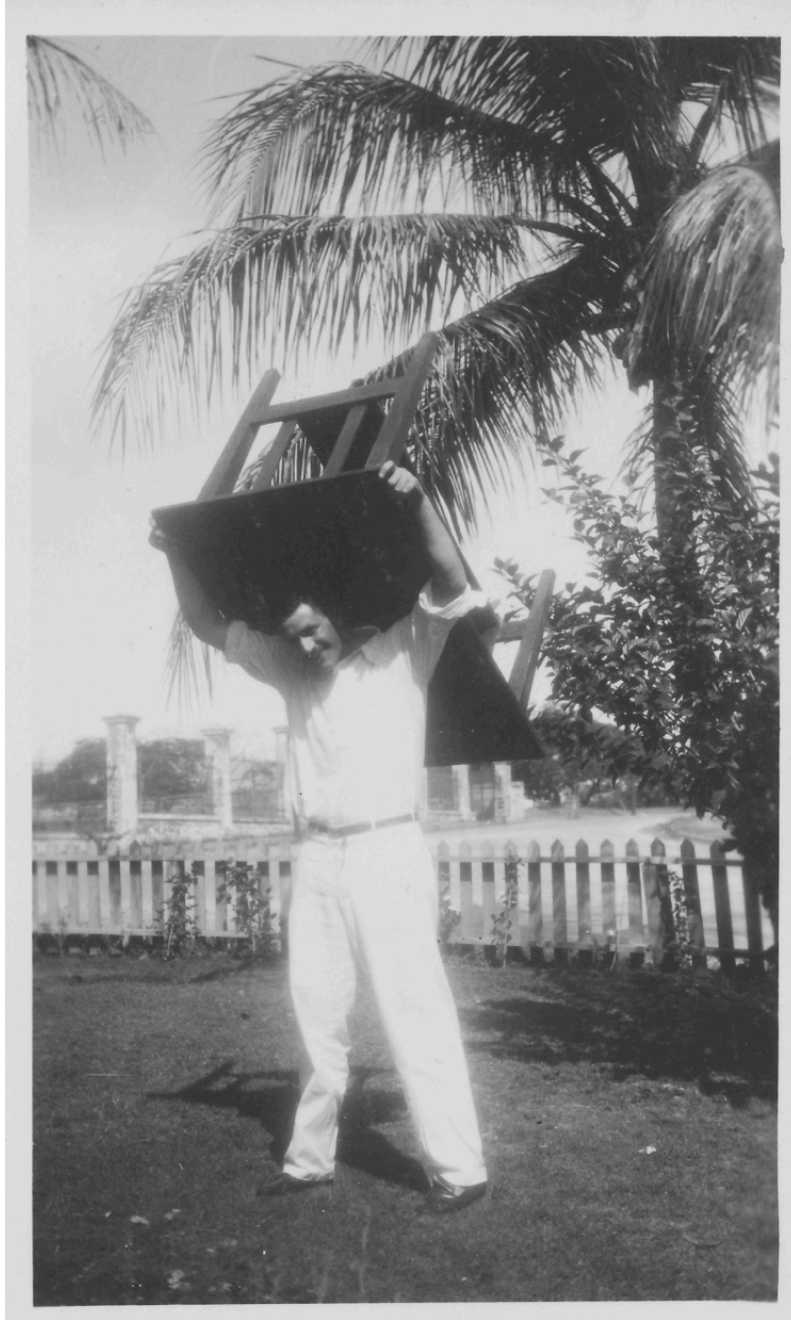


Fig. 5. Mrosovsky 'Portering' in Mexico, 1932.

There is just one photo from the Cambridge days, where Nabokov and Mrosovsky appear together. Robert de Calry is on Nabokov's right: on Nabokov's left is an unidentified student and far left, Mrosovsky, all in graduation gowns. A small contemporary print of this photo was found in Mrosovsky's family papers, but without any inscription on the back.

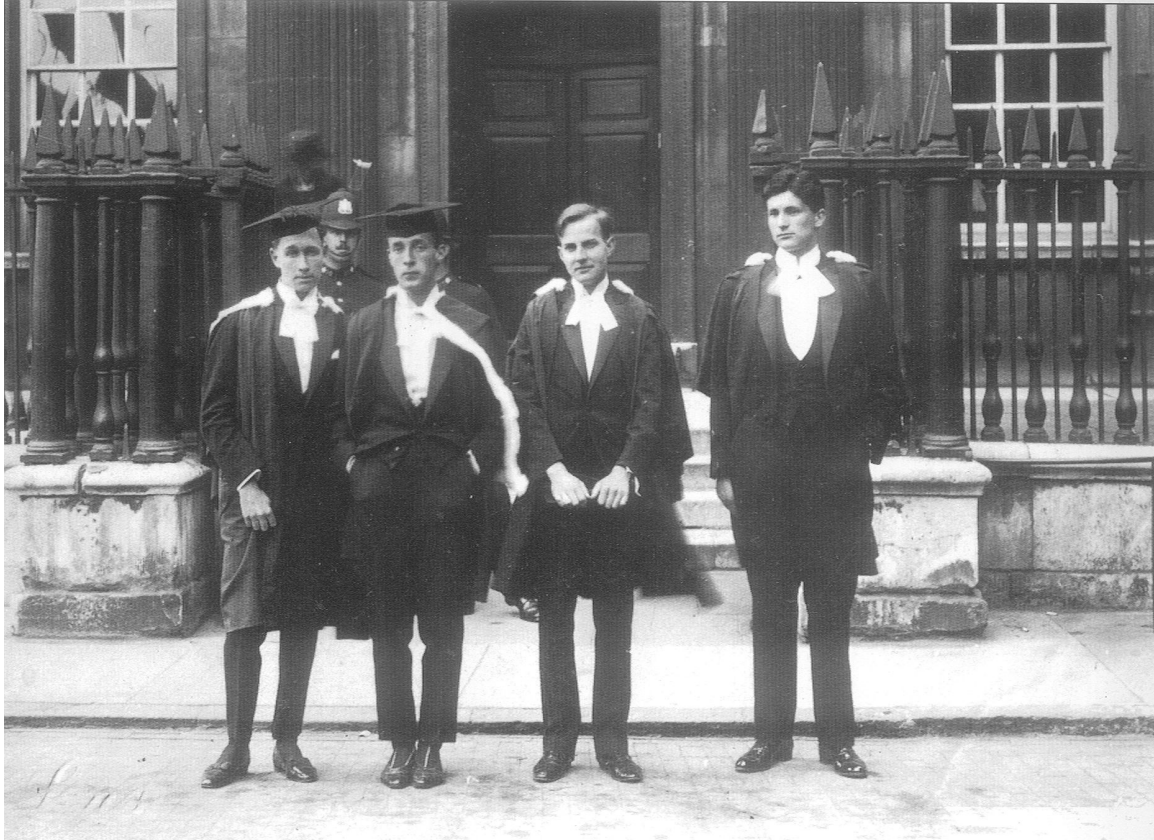


Fig. 6. Cambridge Graduation, 1922.

Left to right: Robert de Calry, Nabokov, Unknown, Mrosovsky.²⁴

What happened to Nabokov after college is well known. As for Mrosovsky, having obtained British citizenship in 1922, his whole working life was spent abroad, as a geophysicist and seismic engineer prospecting for oil companies, apart from four years 1942–1946 in the British Army, and his retirement in England 1960–1972. However, further evidence of Mrosovsky providing material for the character Darwin can be found in *Glory*, when, after coming down from Cambridge, Darwin meets Martin in Berlin:

a) Martin observes that his friend has grown a moustache, described as “a well-trimmed little moustache” in the English translation by Nabokov’s father and son.²⁵ The photo of Mrosovsky at Cambridge, above, shows him as clean-shaven, but he did

²⁴ Note that the identification in the caption provided in the reproduction of the same photograph in Brian Boyd’s biography is incorrect.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 180.

grow a 'toothbrush' moustache afterwards, as proved by the photo in his first English passport.

b) This same passport contains a German visa for 1925, with Potsdam stamps, January entry and February exit.

c) In later life Mrosovsky listed all the places he had lived in, and there on this list is '3 months' in Berlin in 1925! Nabokov and Mrosovsky could therefore have met in real life in Berlin.

2

DESCRIPTION
SIGNALEMENT

Profession } *Chemical Engineer*
 Place and date of birth } *Petersburg*
 Lieu et date de naissance } *17 January 1900.*
 Domicile } *England*
 Height } *6 ft. 2 1/2 in.*
 Taille }
 Colour of eyes } *Brown*
 Couleur des yeux }
 Colour of hair } *Black*
 Couleur de cheveux }
 Special peculiarities } *None.*
 Signes particuliers }

Wife - Femme

CHILDREN - ENFANTS

Name Age Sex
 Nom Age Sexe

3

PHOTOGRAPH OF BEARER

WIFE FEMME

(photo)

SIGNATURE OF WIFE. ET DE SA FEMME

O. Mrosovsky

Fig. 7. Mrosovsky's English passport photo plus details, 1924.

Other clues that *Darwin* is based partly on Mrosovsky are the silences that Martin has to endure just before he leaves the completely unresponsive Darwin, to catch the train, to start his exploit. Mrosovsky was well known in his family for reticence, and questions were often met with long silences instead of answers.

There is, too, the mention in *Glory* of Darwin's engagement. Mrosovsky himself had become engaged at this time. Darwin's fiancée is portrayed as a formidable and probably aristocratic girl. Nabokov's choice of name, Evelyn, is unerring stylistically, recalling other good old English inter-gender names like Hilary and Francis, and placing her in the right social set for Darwin. She also sings "nedurno" ('not badly,' i.e. 'rather well').²⁶



Fig. 8. Battistini as Ruslan.

In 1931, Mrosovsky married a Bedalian girl eight years his junior, whose family had befriended him as a schoolboy. In his wedding certificate his father is named as Vladimir Pavlovich Mrosovsky, Mechanical Engineer. Vladimir Pavlovich gave up his

²⁶ Ibid., p. 181.

job in St. Petersburg in the early 1900s to become a landscape painter in Sicily and Italy but became stranded in St. Petersburg during World War I, perishing there in 1918. In fact, Vladimir was only Mrosovsky's stepfather, as Mrosovsky was actually the natural son of the Italian baritone Mattia Battistini (1856–1928), who sang in Russia every year for over twenty years, before the outbreak of World War I. Battistini was considered the best '*bel canto*' singer of his time, and was hugely popular, especially in Russia.²⁷

When Darwin's fiancée is described as not a bad singer, could that be a covert reference to Mrosovsky's origins? We shall never know for certain, but in Nabokov's writing nothing is 'by accident,' 'ne sluchaino'.

I will now turn to the secondary purpose of this article, to illustrate the ambience of student life at Trinity College, when Nabokov and Mrosovsky were there. I will first deal with Mrosovsky's private correspondence and then with the student magazine.

CORRESPONDENCE

Sport

During Mrosovsky's first term he writes to a young Italian friend, Marcella de Renzis, in Rome:

Cambridge is a strange place when you first come here. It seems as if everybody in the town knows you. All the clubs begin to fight for you. The Rowing club invites you to row, the boxing, soccer, rugby clubs want you and each tell you, [you] are a darned fool if you don't take up their sport. As a matter of fact, I am playing 'soccer' that is Association football, distinguished from Rugby footer by the fact you don't use your hands.

²⁷ Chuilon, Jacques. *Mattia Battistini: Forward* (Lanham, MA: Scarecrow Press, 2009), pp. vii–viii.

Soccer figures prominently in *Glory*; both fictional Martin and real-life Nabokov played for Trinity. Darwin goes to watch Martin play. Even Zilanov is in touch with the English love of sport, remarking “the only thing colleges care about here is ‘le sport’.”²⁸

Tennis

Mrosovsky writes to his mother in 1920: “Abbiamo giocato (we played) tennis con N. A. Holstein-Gottorp alias Roumanoff ci-devant-etc.” This is surely N.R., the ‘Vadim’ of *Glory*. We know Nabokov himself was a good tennis player, and earned money in Berlin after college as a tennis coach. There is a wonderful passage in *Glory* describing a tennis match.²⁹

Cosmopolitan composition of the student group

Mrosovsky writes, again in his letter to Marcella, that “the place is swarming with Japanese, Indians, Negroes, Americans, Russians, Serbs, French, and representatives of nearly everything else.” He later refers to the two English princes: “Prince Albert and Prince Henry are up at Trinity and lead the ordinary life of an undergraduate.” Prince Albert was Etonian; Prince Henry was one of 23 students from the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth, in Nabokov’s and Mrosovsky’s year.

Russia

In 1920, Mrosovsky, now a 2nd-year student, writes to Marcella’s mother, Baroness de Renzis: “There are quite a few interesting freshmen up this term, one Wells, son of H.G. the novelist, keeps close by me, and I have had some interesting talks with him as he has been in Russia on a visit to Gorky with his father last October.”

Although Mrosovsky seems to be accepted as ‘one of the Russians’, Darwin, of course, was an Englishman, with no grasp of Russian. When Martin is visited at

²⁸ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 79.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

Cambridge by his friends the Zilanovs, and Russian is being spoken, Darwin says, “translate please”.³⁰ Similarly, there is evidence that Mrosovsky’s Russian was also poor. In a 1916 letter from Bedales School to his mother he complains that she made a big mistake in letting him forget his Russian. He wants to go back to St. Petersburg and finish his studies there, though “it would take me two years to learn Russian, and all the Russian methods of study which are different.”

Mrosovsky did go to St. Petersburg that summer, but the October Revolution put an end to his plan to study in Russia. There is a dark seam in *Glory*: Zilanov’s dangerous journeys into Russia, the sufferings of the Zilanov family, Irina’s maltreatment, and the death of the son-in-law in the Crimea fighting with Wrangel’s army. When Martin imagines himself in *Glory* charging bravely on horseback at the enemy, Nabokov is thinking of his cousin Yuri.³¹ If Darwin is partly based on Mrosovsky, Martin is partly Nabokov himself, and the two characters are good foils to each other. Their roles are reversed in the end — Darwin becoming conventional, and Martin performing his exploit. As we are not told what happened to Martin, the reader can only fear the worst, seeing the ominous bird on the gate that won’t latch, amidst the dank woods.³²

Mrosovsky’s letters to his mother containing references to tragic news

In 1920, there is a description of the brutal murder by a band of Reds of an old civilian friend fleeing from Stavropol in 1918. In 1921, Mrosovsky’s wrote of his stunned reaction to the long delayed information about the death of his stepfather, Vladimir Mrosovsky, in St. Petersburg, probably from malnutrition and illness. Apparently, someone had witnessed ‘the body being carried out of the house on a mattress’. In *Glory* Martin’s father is described as having died in Russia after an illness and Zilanov saw the coffin being carried out.³³ Nabokov’s father was assassinated in Berlin, in April 1922.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 8; 71.

³¹ Ibid., p. 97.

³² Ibid., p. 187.

³³ Ibid., p. 79.

THE TRINITY MAGAZINE

This is a Trinity undergraduate publication with a strong sense of identity and self-esteem. For example, there is a Latin song celebrating the only three universities — Oxford, Cambridge and Trinity — which claims that the best one is Trinity. The magazine is jocular and erudite, although it devotes about half of its copy to sport. It is also full of intellectual playfulness, which may have influenced the style of *Glory*. In what follows, I will address five basic themes typical of the journal based on the number of issues that were available to Nabokov during his time in Cambridge: the treatment of soccer; literary allusions; humour and science; cartoons; and, finally, the fleeting appearance of Nabokov himself on the pages of the student magazine.

a) Reportage of soccer matches

These include the famous 1–0 victory of Trinity against St. John’s College, though without naming Nabokov, Trinity’s goalkeeper. Trinity won the Varsity cup three times running.

b) Humorous literary allusions

The popularity of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle among the undergraduates is supported by the item in *The Trinity Magazine*, “A Sherlock Holmes Examination,” comprising of eight sections satirizing a degree paper (with questions similar to the kind asked nowadays on TV quiz shows). All questions require a detailed knowledge of the text, for instance, in Question 4: “Give the names of two undergraduates at Trinity college with whom Sherlock Holmes had dealings”; or in Question 5: “When did Sherlock Holmes masquerade as — 10 disguises listed —, from ‘Norwegian explorer’ to ‘plumber’?”³⁴

In *Glory* Nabokov indicates Darwin’s strength and size in the passage about the retrieval of Martin’s proposal letter to Rose, involving the bending of the poker and the £5 wager about straightening it.³⁵ This must surely be a covert reference to a famous

³⁴ *The Trinity Magazine*, vol. 2, no. 6 (Trinity College Cambridge, 1921–1923), p. 53.

³⁵ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 101.

passage in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's short story, "The Speckled Band,"³⁶ when Holmes is threatened by the huge, aggressive Dr. Grimesby Roylott, who demonstrates how dangerous his grip can be by seizing the poker and bending it into a curve. Dr. Grimesby Roylott then strides away, but Holmes's response, to show that his own grip "was not much more feeble", "with a sudden effort" straightens the steel poker out again.

This scene is humorously adapted to the storyline of *Glory* because Darwin wants to *lose* his bet. Darwin bets Martin £5 if, after bending the poker, Darwin can straighten it again. Darwin intends to lose so that Martin does not have to pay back the £5 given to Rose in exchange for the proposal letter.

Furthermore, the joking literary tone of *The Trinity Magazine* is perhaps echoed in *Glory* by Nabokov's parodic hints at M. Proust.

Darwin lends Martin his book of short stories acclaimed by connoisseurs,³⁷ but it turns out to be more like 'tractates' on subjects such as 'corkscrews' reminiscent of the successful young author in Proust who wrote so well about Bulgarian rifles.³⁸

Later in *Glory* Nabokov writes of the squat little white church on a hillock tending as it were the izbas that looked on the point of wandering away.³⁹ In Proust the houses and church of the village of Combrai from afar are described as a shepherd minding his sheep.⁴⁰

Attributed literary allusions in *Glory* include Mayne Reid, (*The Headless Horseman*),⁴¹ Pierre Louys (*Les chansons de Bilitis*),⁴² and invocation of Homer's *Odyssey*, calling the wind that fans Martin's lover Alla in Athens, "the same breeze that once filled Ulysses' sails"!⁴³

³⁶ Doyle, Sir Arthur Conan. *Collected Short Stories: The Speckled Band* (London: John Murray 1931), p. 173.

³⁷ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 63.

³⁸ Proust, Marcel. *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu: A l'Ombre des Jeunes filles en Fleur*, vol. 3, part 1.

³⁹ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 156.

⁴⁰ Proust, Marcel. *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu: Du cote de chez Swann*, Vol. 1, Part 2.

⁴¹ Nabokov, *Glory*, p. 41.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

c) The Trinity cat contributes an article called, “Is there Design in the Universe?”.

After claiming a lifetime of meditation “on the deepest problems of the Universe,” at the request of the Editor, the cat consents to give his opinion to mere human beings. “Is the Universe constructed on rational principles?... there are some facts which seem... to prove that it is not. For example, the existence of dogs.”⁴⁴ Could the status of the Trinity cat have encouraged Nabokov’s acceptance in later years of the house cat in his rented accommodation in Ithaca?

d) A cartoon entitled “When in Rome” with nine sections showing a fresher trying to conform to the dress code (fig. 9). The character meets in succession eight other students, all differently dressed, so, by copying the previous person he met, he is always incorrectly dressed. He ends up by combining as many as possible styles of dress in one! (This cartoon supports the importance of Darwin’s advice, above, about how to dress).

e) Finally, in *The Trinity Magazine* of 1922 there is an intimate, amusing and eccentric “Who’s Who?” of Nabokov’s and Mrosovsky’s year. The level of humour can be gauged by the entry for A. Riddle which reads: “Ask me another!”.

By contrast, for DA Basanta Kumar there is a mathematical formula. Nabokov’s close friend De Calry, R.M.C.’s entry states: “Leader of the Trinity Vendee. A picker-up of unconsidered thrones, he has all the charm without the violence of the conspirator, and would never overstep the laws of the Duel. He has never been known to cut anything but a lecture, or wound anyone but his tutor.”⁴⁵ (De Calry was the son of a count. Mrosovsky signed one of his Cambridge photos — ‘Count Peter de Mrosovsky!’ [fig. 10]).

⁴⁴ *The Trinity Magazine*, November 1921, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 22.

⁴⁵ *The Trinity Magazine*, June 1922, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 77.

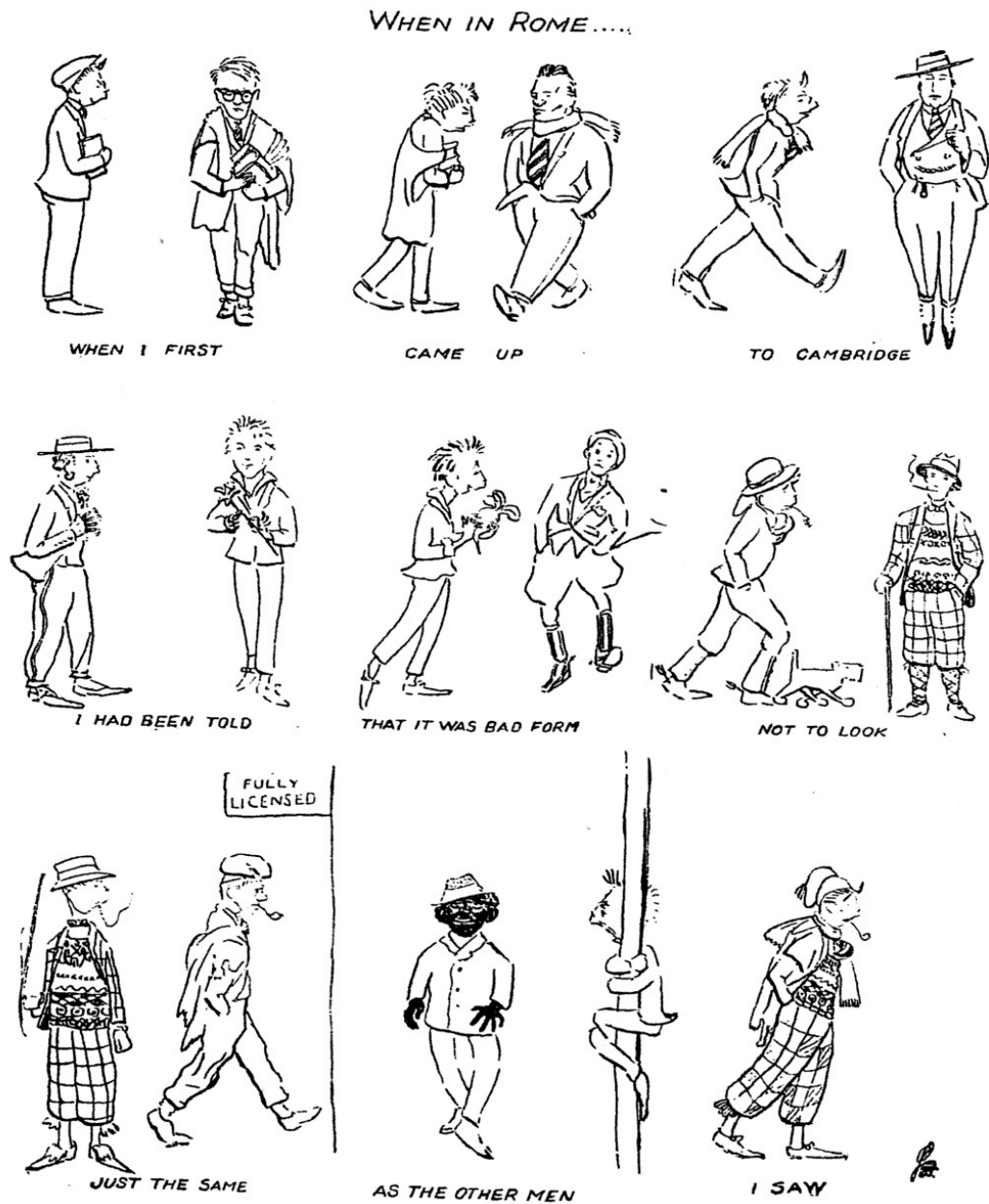


Fig. 9. Cartoon from *The Trinity Magazine*, Vol. 5, No. 1, December 1923, p. 14.



Fig. 10. Mrosovsky's Cambridge photo signed 'Count Peter de Mrosovsky'.

The “Nabokoff, [sic] V.” entry reads: “A welcome visitor who has made the college his home and our language his own.”⁴⁶ This surely refers to Nabokov's poem, “Home,” his first in English, and published in *The Trinity Magazine*.

This does not fully tally with Nabokov's tenacious hold on his Russian identity, especially the Russian language. He is the student who treasures his great Dahl dictionary, and who, when he leaves Cambridge on graduation, is to translate *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian, a linguistic feat, after joining the large, cultured Russian community in Berlin.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

Nabokov writes in *Speak, Memory*: “The story of my college years in England is really the story of my trying to become a Russian writer. I had the feeling that Cambridge and all its famed features — venerable elms, blazoned windows, loquacious tower clocks... existed merely to frame and support my rich nostalgia.”⁴⁷ This does not do justice to Nabokov’s lifelong refusal of honorary degrees, on the grounds that his Cambridge degree was enough.

The “Mrosofsky P.” entry begins as follows: “[He] terrifies us. We would like to ask why he draws his curtains nowadays, what it is like up there, when he is going to dance on the grass again, or play bowls the wrong way up, but we daren’t.”⁴⁸ There is an aloofness about Mrosofsky, combined with unusual body language (the latter referred to *in passim*, above, about ‘Darwin’ and Mrosofsky).

Trinity college offered a culturally and socially rich haven to Nabokov and Mrosofsky in Cambridge where the student body was multinational long before the world was described as a ‘global village.’

One twist remains in the story of Mrosofsky’s continuous admiration of Nabokov’s work — how Mrosofsky lost his first edition of the two-volume green paperback Olympia press copy of *Lolita*, bought in Paris, like *Ulysses*, on publication. On retirement in 1959, he sent his personal effects from Italy to England by sea in tea chests. Unfortunately, *Lolita* was found at the top of an inspected case of books shortly before publication in England was permitted. It was seized by H.M. Customs at Dover, as ‘banned material,’ and destroyed.

CONCLUSION

Both Nabokov and Mrosofsky were unusual men, with similar European backgrounds, who shared a formative period of their lives as undergraduates at Trinity College. Although Nabokov became famous, and Mrosofsky did not, they always liked each other, and their friendship, cultivated at great distance, and with long intervals, was lifelong. Mrosofsky bought all Nabokov’s books, except the first translation of *Glory*, as

⁴⁷ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak Memory* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1951), p. 190.

⁴⁸ *The Trinity Magazine*, June 1922, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 80.

Nabokov instructed the publisher, McGraw-Hill, to send his friend a complimentary copy. Mrosovky is surely to be counted as one of Nabokov's "wise readers."

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Tatiana Ponomareva, Director of the Nabokov Museum St. Petersburg, for our joint authorship of the Russian version of this article (see *Nabokovskii Sbornik*, 2, 2015, pp. 266–91). I am most grateful for the assistance of Jonathan Smith, archivist at Trinity College Cambridge, who provided contemporary data.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of my father,
Peter Mrosovsky, 1900–1972.*

