

DMITRI NABOKOV

*May 1934 – February 2012**

When his mother died, Dmitri Nabokov asked me to speak at the memorial service he arranged for her not far from Montreux. I said what I had to say; and as I left the podium, failed to see the step. There was her son, on his feet, his hand gripping my arm. That was Dmitri: alert to the impending disaster. The self-elected, self-serving Nabokov scholars; the typos. The copyright infringers, the rush of a culture that threatened to bury the past; the eulogist about to fall on her face. He rose to the occasion, looking, even then, like his father, and gifted with his mother's warm, unassuming manner. Canned soups were fine; bargain basement wines; apartments wallpapered and furnished, however dubiously, by the prior occupant. Visitors were apt to find him in shirt tails and flip flops.

When he delivered me safely to my seat that day, Dmitri went to the podium to deliver his own eulogy for his mother. He wasn't good at keeping things — phone numbers got lost, schedules, diets, a copy of the first edition of *Lolita* inscribed to him by his father. Following the death of his mother, he would begin to lose much of what was his own, including, to his occasional dismay, the privacy he had as the only child in the house of an émigré professor and his wife. With age went the voice that climbed through opera venues in Rome and Istanbul. What he referred to as “the toys” would go — the model train that whistled around the floor of his dining room in Montreux was packed

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away; the souped-up cars and boats that unnerved his parents sat unused. But what he would hold on to was the impulse to be a good son.

That impulse is writ in the Nabokov translations he undertook with his father, and later his mother. He would outlive her by nearly 21 years, and that impulse would keep him on his feet even as he was confined to hospitals and wheelchairs. He would complete what she had undertaken: he sent the Montreux archives, sealed and unsealed, to the New York Public Library; collected, annotated and translated the balance of the Nabokov stories — behind schedule, they appeared late in the year to become Book # 11 on the New York *Time*'s list of the ten best books of the year. He would do what she would never have done: she'd elected to open the archives to Brian Boyd, resulting in the magisterial two-volume biography of her husband; Dmitri opened the archives to Stacy Schiff, who won a Pulitzer prize for her biography of his self-effacing mother.

His mother said that she would never return to Russia; on his father's 100th birthday, Dmitri went. Feted in a St Petersburg released from the Soviet thumb, he met a young scholar, Olga Voronina, who, some five years later, would set in motion what became the first royalty-bearing edition of Nabokov published in Russian in Russia. Among the volumes Dmitri would authorize: the first collection, Andrey Babikov's, of all of Nabokov for, and on, the theatre; Gennady Barabatarlo's Russian translations of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and, the novel embraced in some quarters as the anthem for a new kind of Russian, *Pnin*.

If his mother mourned the inattention given Nabokov the poet, Dmitri — his ear tuned to the air-borne sound of a living, breathing Nabokov — would authorize, for performances in theatres filled with living, breathing human beings, stripped-down versions of *Lolita: A Screenplay*. It premiered in Milan under his supervision; other versions played in Germany, in Bucharest, Ljubljana, at the Abbey in Dublin; last I knew, it was headed for Paris.

Would his mother have welcomed the internet or released *The Original of Laura*? Her son wasn't certain, but he would applaud the best of the VN websites and toy with the notion of a website for *Laura* so that Nabokovians could join him in playing cards.

Did he have a good time? There is, I think, no question that the family business of keeping VN up and running enlarged and heartened his mother. In some sense, the role

of businessman of letters would diminish Dmitri. Superbly educated, graceful, volatile, rendered, in effect, stationary, he would miss — a good-enough metaphor here — the open road.

And the readers of Nabokov? He would enlarge their numbers, many times over. It may be that he came to trust them rather more than his parents did, but there is no question that on his death their good son would leave Nabokovians enriched: smarter, wiser, more exuberant, better equipped to see. Therein resides honor.

Nikki Smith

*Agent for the Nabokov estate,
1985-2008*

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