

DMITRI NABOKOV

(10 May, 1934 † 22[23] February, 2012)*



RR Bridge at Nestorstrasse, West Berlin

* This is a free and enlarged translation from Russian of the obituary that was published in the Moscow daily *Kommersant*, in the 27 February issue.

He died, of a lung infection, in a hospital 17 km from the clinic where his father had died of a similar cause. His lifetime matched that of his father's within half a year. He was born when his father was thirty-five, and survived him by as many years. Even the date of his death had an odd echo of the well-known nonplus concerning his father's birthday: Nabokov Sr was born on April the 22nd by the N.S., but in his exile chose to mark it on the 23rd; most obituaries reported that Dmitri Nabokov died on the 22nd whereas a few, perhaps more reliable, claimed that it happened at 3 am on the 23rd. These symmetries arrest attention — but their crowding also dulls it; yet neither VVN nor DVN would find them gratuitous.

His father wrote that life “is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of perfect darkness,” the one that precedes man's coming into existence and the other, to which man is speeding “at some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour.” This is said right at the gangway into *Conclusive Evidence* (of the author's having existed, per his explanation of the original title), a memoir cut into the patented faceted shape of a Nabokov novel. At its entrance we see the future memoirist gaining awareness of his three-year-old self as he walks between his parents, each holding him by the hand; the next generation's family trio exits the book in the same fashion, Mitia's father and mother leading him by the hand from Europe to other shores, pausing on railway bridges in West Berlin, Prague, and Paris as he grows three, four, five, and six years old.

He did not triplicate that pantomime of the threesome. His death cut off the Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov line: both his uncles were childless, he was an only child, with no progeny. The branchy family tree dwindling to naught was practically a natural law in Russian emigration. He never married while his parents — whom he adored with devotion rarely seen nowadays — were alive mainly because their moral and intellectual example set such a high mark and contrasted so sharply with what had become common by the time of his coming of age, that he could not quite imagine any one of the women he courted as their daughter-in-law. And when they both died, he was kept from marrying

— once coming very close to — by the set habits of a sixty-year-old bachelor and *bon enfant*.

His manners and tact were of the old-world charming sort; his mind was sharp and receptive; his vocabulary and verbal dexterity in the three European languages he knew well in addition to his native, were prodigious. He was slightly shy about his written Russian, but his speech was of the extinct noble variety, which differed so much from the poor gunky patois now standard in the land of Nabokov's birth that when he started making televised appearances in the Russian Federation many claimed he had lost his mother tongue. (The same was said twenty years earlier about his father, when the Russian *Lolita* became freely accessible there). That uncommonly resourceful facility with words across linguistic borders made him a natural early translator and, I think, the best translator of his father's fiction and verse, first into English and later into Italian. From the 1980s he took upon himself the huge and ever growing management of his father's posthumous publishing enterprise and of the scrupulous protection of his rights as an author and his honour as a man. In this undertaking he made many more mistakes than in his translations, first shooting voles with a bazooka, then running out of ammunition at the approach of howling hyenas. Publishing the draft cards of *Laura* his mother had not had the heart to burn as she had been told to was, to my mind (which he knew), the last such mistake. But those who summarily condemned him for "betraying his father" (*Russian* bloggerheads upbraided him especially fiercely) did not know — and did not trust him when he tried to plant hints in interviews and in the awkward, roundabout preface — that his decision was influenced by the heavy press of material and immaterial circumstances which he hoped would have justified it in the eyes of his father. He had no one whose business and right it might have been to question this supposition, much less excoriate him for it.

He was a man of exceptional faculties. Well-bred at home and educated, thanks to the unsparing efforts of his parents, at first-rate grammar schools, then at Harvard, he received superb vocal training in Boston and Milan, and started on a professional career as an operatic basso. He debuted in *La Bohème* as Colline, a philosopher from the first

act; in the last, he pawns his loved overcoat so as to buy medicine for the dying mistress of his pal (played by Pavarotti, also debuting that night). Nabokov, who was in the audience, must have reflected on Gogol's famous plot turned inside out.



In his Montreux apartment, July 28, 2011.

Photograph by Olga Voronina

Despite the initial success, his professional career, stretching as it did over twenty years on some of the best stages all over the world, never took wing. It demanded full-throttled, undivided, self-denying dedication whereas he shared it with energy-consuming hobbies, car racing being at the time the chief one — also on the best European stages (a *basso profundo* Formula One autodrome was right next to his Monza flat). He took numerous prizes,* but this dangerous diversion (race drivers crashed much more frequently and fatally then than they do now) sapped even more nervous energy from his parents, who, like the elderly parents of a demented boy in Nabokov's 1948 story, waited with sinking hearts by the phone in their Montreux-Palace rooms for him to ring to confirm that he was alive and in one piece after that race as well ("I make the sign of the cross every time he makes that call," Nabokov confessed to his sister.) In a similar fashion, they had waited at the bottom of a peak in the Rockies, looking up in the rapidly darkening twilight for their 17-year-old son to come down from a solitary climb that stuck him on a narrow ledge some two miles above them.

He always called, even when, having at last squeezed his six-and-a-half-foot frame out of the window of the enflamed Ferrari that fishtailed out of control on a mundane drive, he rang up his now widowed mother from a sterile bubble in a Lausanne burn unit to tell her, in a faint but tamed voice, stifling the superhuman pain, that he would not be able to make it for dinner as pre-agreed. This, of course, reminds one — as it no doubt did him — of the heroics of some of his father's heroes, but it was by no means affected.

His literary gift was genuine, too. His translations, both in prose and in verse, combine precision, inventiveness, and elegance to such a rare degree of success that the transformation strikes one as a verbal miracle and *becomes* an original in its own right. He wrote a large and complex novel and published an excellent, swift-paced memoir in a film-script present tense, *Close Calls and Fulfilled Dreams*.

* Those interested in his motoring tastes can look up a well-illustrated two-part 2009 story by Roger Boylan on *autosavant.com* (!).

Just as his parents, he was a dampproof anticommunist and anti-Soviet, and in general was athwart the sinister bend of the age, sometimes in hyperbolic defiance to whatever its left-pulling tendencies. He once remarked (in a private letter) that the latest version of the 1,250 hp Veyron (a recent Bugatti supercar) barrelling flat-out at its top speed (253 mph) would run out of fuel in exactly twelve minutes, “a detail I would gladly stuff down the throats of the tree-huggers.” Had his father lived to encounter the term — it entered the American usage the year he died — he might have quipped that one should at least know *the name* of what one hugs. Like his parents, he never visited the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics; he saw for the first time his father’s former St Petersburg house and the estate in Rozhestveno, not yet burnt down, only in the mid-1990s. It was in a sense a visit to the museum: 47, Morskaia Street had by then been turned in part into a Nabokov memorial, and the city had received back its original name yet remained the capital of Leningrad Province. Not every fulfilled dream comes true.

From the early forties to the late fifties, in fiction after fiction — in verse, too — his father would place his youngsters in various imaginable dangers and horrors, as if in order to render harmless this particular kind of disaster in life by forestalling it in fiction, counting on fate’s supposed aversion to plagiarism. A lifeless body on a remote hill in “When he was small, when he would fall...”, a strange war-time poem; kidnapped and tortured David Krug; the poor youth tortured in a different way in “Signs and Symbols”; precocious, “up-up-up” tall teenager Victor, whose dreams are permeable to Pnin’s, an illegitimate son of his “water father’s” heartless former wife and a witless German bromide, both running him through the gauntlet of frightfully idiotic Freudian tests; lanky Lance vanishing into thin air while his parents stare through their tears into the starry night skies and imagine him scaling the craggy cosmic space as he did the mountains; even Lolita, — all are part of the perhaps longer series of stand-ins.

He was addicted to high speed — not of the contemplative kind, which tachycardically drives one to the borderline of eternity, but the kinetic, particularly one generated by an internal combustion motor and measured by the tachometer on a dashboard. He raced his 900 hp speedboat in the Atlantic and flew a helicopter over the

Mediterranean. It was therefore the queerer and the sadder to see him in a wheelchair pattering about his Montreux flat at the speed of ten manual revolutions per minute. But even months before he died he still hoped to gain back his driving licence.



Montreux Railway Station

His father's next-to-last novel closes on an odd sentence that is supposed to identify the voice welcoming the newly arrived hero of the book to an afterlife. And even though the author took pains to make up a gauche interview with himself in order to clarify that the narrators were spirits of the dead, and that this particular one could be

recognized by his knack for jumbling idiomatic bits, it is possible to wonder whether that explanation fully drains the meaning of the “easy does it, you know, son.”

Gennady Barabtarlo



Family Grave in Clarens