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## DEATH IS BUT A QUESTION OF STYLE <sup>1</sup>

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“He who finds a new ending for a drama, with no death or exit, will be the greatest man of all.”

Victor Shklovsky, *Energiya zabluzhdeniya*

**W**hy had he moved to Switzerland? Nabokov explained it this way: “There are... family reasons for our living in this part of Europe. I have a sister in Geneva and a son in Milan.”<sup>2</sup>

But still, why had he settled in Montreux, a small town on the shores of Lake Geneva? The question gave me no peace from the moment I arrived. The country was marvelous, of course--lakes, mountains, cows, cheese, chocolate, watches, jewelry stores, churches, money, and banks. Everything is clean and orderly, the shrubbery and trees are pruned even in the woods, as if they were in model parks. And everything is illuminated by an incredible

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from Chapter 1 of the book, *Imagining Nabokov: Russia Between Art and Politics*, forthcoming from Yale University Press, November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Interviews#4, p. 49. Henceforth in text and footnotes as *SO*, I.

peacefulness, not even peacefulness so much as infinity, timelessness, eternity. For immortality it's marvelous, of course, but rather boring for living.

Nabokov was a famous writer, world-renowned, the author of the celebrated *Lolita* and *Invitation of a Beheading*, a professor at Cornell University, a contributor to the *New Yorker*, the darling of journalists and a friend of Edmund Wilson, and now, after twenty successful years in America, not to mention earlier years (albeit maybe less successful) in such respected metropolises as Saint Petersburg, Berlin, and Paris, he moved into a hotel suite in a small resort town in a very small country.

"Why did he move here?" I asked myself as I entered Montreux one sunny September morning the year of Nabokov's centennial.

Critics, taking his lead, explain the move biographically: "Relatives in Europe. Montreux resembles the Mediterranean resorts where the Nabokovs spent summer months. Mountains and water are next to each other on a small piece of land. West European butterflies, different from Russian and East Coast U.S. species. The country's central location was also important: Italy, France, and the Frankfurt Book Fair are all nearby--everyone would visit."<sup>3</sup>

As I drove down Grand-Rue, the town's main promenade, I had to accept the biographers' version: it was true--the beauty, the central location, the European atmosphere. And the luxury, of course--Nabokov would always remain a Russian aristocrat.

Which hotel was his? There was no lack of fashionable hotels in Montreux. All along Grand-Rue, one side facing the lake, the other rising into the mountains, hotels vied in luxury, grandeur, and size. I was looking for something small and exquisitely refined, suitable for the

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<sup>3</sup> See, Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 421-423; pp. 459-460

writer who hated a crowd. After all, if you're going to live twenty years in a hotel, especially in a resort town, it would probably be in some pension, modest, homey, and far from the madding mass.

Which then was Nabokov's? Before my eyes there arose a hulk of a hotel, which even by luxurious European standards was too luxurious: huge, much larger than anything around it, with ornate balconies, filigree, and plaster carvings from the Silver Age of the last century. The architecture of Prague, Vienna, and Saint Petersburg seemed like models of modernist modesty in comparison with the bright yellow cornices, eclectically scattered along the majestic façade of the Palace. The edifice resembled a very rich, expensive cake, with butter cream icing, which despite its gloriousness was a bit too rich. The grandiose pomposity took my breath away.

Nevertheless, those sunny cornices had the amazingly attractive eccentricity and self-confidence typical of wealth, genius, and aristocracy. I recalled some lines from *Speak, Memory*: "From the age of seven, everything I felt in connexion with a rectangle of framed sunlight was dominated by a single passion. If my first glance of the morning was for the sun, my first thought was for the butterflies it would engender,"<sup>4</sup> and had the fleeting thought, "Nabokov must have liked this place," as I vainly sought any signs of Nabokov's presence. After all, the famous writer had lived in Montreux for so many years. But for nought. It's amazing how calmly, not to say indifferently, the Swiss treat their celebrities, all the more foreign ones. Of course they know about Nabokov, they know that he spent almost twenty years in Switzerland, but it doesn't seem to elicit any particular delight. Big deal, Nabokov, so what?

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<sup>4</sup> V. Nabokov. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, p. 90. Henceforth as *SM*.

They say that Charlie Chaplin, who lived in neighboring Vevey, moved to this country precisely because no one cared about his presence here, while England and France welcomed him with ovations, flowers, love, and adoration. It's not that the Swiss didn't know who Charlie Chaplin was--they are a cultured and educated people. But still, "Charlie Chaplin, so what?"

Undoubtedly, I myself should have known of the famous Montreux Palace, but Nabokov, who was in my mind larger than life, didn't seem to require such minutiae as his hotel information--it seemed too mundane. I somehow thought that at least the whole town, if not the whole country, especially for his hundredth birthday, would be his big (small, due to their size) literary museum.

The only way to find out where Nabokov lived was to go into one of the town's hotels in the hopes that the people there--polite and helpful--would have the necessary information for a less indifferent foreigner.

I decided on the glistening yellow cake. They'd be sure to have tourist brochures.

I bounded out of the car, entered the enormous and luxurious lobby, looked around and took a few steps, only to freeze. Before me, in a bronze chair, sat Nabokov.

Not at all how I had pictured him--the suave Russian aristocrat, the elegant British gentleman (a look picked up in Cambridge), the confident American professor, the exquisite European snob. He was almost sprawled in the chair, wearing a baggy jacket, vest and knickerbockers, aloofly staring off to one side. I had the feeling that sitting there, he was waiting for none other than me.

Like Martin in *Glory*, I was beckoned by the sunny hotel, and I came in response to that call: "What was it about that hotel that lured him so strongly? . . . But there was no doubt that it

beckoned to him: the reflected sunlight in its windows flashed a silent sign of invitation. Martin was even frightened by such enigmatic intrusion, such abstruse insistence. . . . There he must go down: it would be wrong to ignore such blandishments.”<sup>5</sup>

Arriving without an invitation, even without a warning, but completely by accident and unerringly choosing the right place, I deserved Nabokov’s approval, even his trust, for proving the truth of his own theory that “intuition is a sesame of love.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, thirty years earlier he would not have forgiven such liberties--there were plenty who wanted to drop in without invitation and it wasn’t the business of the hotel to select visitors--but now, plunged into eternal bronze meditation, he treated my impertinence with surprising geniality.

*Speak, Memory* opens with a description of a young man who finds the black abyss of prenatal existence more frightening than the black abyss of postmortal nonexistence. An empty baby carriage in a homemade movie scares him to death: dead, he is certain to leave behind a great writer, but never being born, he can’t become Nabokov.

With his bronze tranquility, Vladimir Vladimirovich confirmed this obvious but rarely expressed truth--before birth a person doesn’t know his place in the world and that frightens him. After death, his position is defined, which frees him forever of anxiety and restlessness. Nabokov will now for ever and ever sit in the bronze chair in the Palace Hotel, in Montreux, Switzerland.

“Why did you move here?” I asked after some hesitation in English. There was nothing Slavic in that detached and inaccessible figure, who had consciously switched from the language of stormy Russian passions to inscrutable English. I knew that he spoke Russian only to his

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<sup>5</sup> V. Nabokov. *Glory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> V. Nabokov. *Bend Sinister*. New York: Vintage International, 1990, p. 207. Henceforth as BS.

intimates. My brand of Russian, on the other hand, to his taste was probably too polluted by Soviet-speak.

"You see," he replied unexpectedly in our native tongue. (Thousands of people had come to worship him, a twentieth-century classic. While I had come to visit, simply to visit Vladimir Nabokov, a writer, and he who had written *Glory* must have appreciated my boldness. "Unless of course," an unwelcome thought zipped through my mind, "he is so completely bored to death in this monumental eternity that he welcomes even the slightest distraction.")

"You must have noticed by now that nothing ever happens in Switzerland. It is neutral in all respects. **No bothersome demonstrations, no spiteful strikes. Alpine butterflies. Fabulous sunsets--just west of my window, spangling the lake, splitting the crimson sun! Also, the pleasant surprise of a metaphorical sunset in charming surroundings.**<sup>7</sup> And now my monument has forever become part of this magnificently beautiful monotony," he smiled.

"Russia, you know, can at any moment turn back, rush off to the left, the right, rear up, and, as is its habit, erase any slices of time that are inconvenient for new ideologies, as it did long ago in 1917 or more recently in 1991. America... America is developing with such speed that in the final analysis, without wanting to, it must constantly recycle (that is what you call that now?) old memories, old idols, in order to free up space for the continuously appearing new ones, who instantly vanish in their turn. I'm not even speaking of the constant weather cataclysms--floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes--that replace there the catastrophes of revolution.

"But perhaps you'd like some tea?" he said with sudden hospitality.

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<sup>7</sup> SO, I#19.

“We usually have tea in the music room. Without music, of course. I’m not a great music lover, you know. I prefer chess.” Nabokov regarded me dubiously. He must have thought that since I didn’t know his hotel, then I might not know about chess, or musical allusions, or perhaps, even the butterflies. I was embarrassed, but it would have been stupid to explain that I had read, knew, and understood. How else could I have guessed which was his hotel? And now, hearing a train pulling away from the station on the neighboring Rue de la Gare, I knew for sure why he had moved here--stations and “trains with fabulous destinations” (*Glory*, 133), those “infinitely long-distance trains”<sup>8</sup> had always captivated him, as they captivated Martin Edelweiss and Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, those cosmopolitan doubles of little Volodya, young Sirin, and today’s eminent Vladimir Nabokov.

Not seeming to notice my confusion, Nabokov continued, “We moved into a lovely small part, which was called Cygne then, and the Palace itself always seemed just a luxurious neighbor to us. **We dwell in the older part of the Palace Hotel, in its original part really, which was all that existed a hundred and fifty years ago (you can still see that initial inn and our future windows in old prints of 1840 or so).**”<sup>9</sup>

“But let’s get back to chess. It is as creative as music, but it’s quieter, calmer, wiser. Its problems **demand from the composer the same virtues that characterize all worthwhile art: originality, invention, harmony, conciseness, complexity, and splendid insincerity.**<sup>10</sup> You have read *The Luzhin Defense*, of course?” he asked. Blushing, I nodded: of course! “Our music room is very beautiful. Once its walls were painted with Russian landscapes. I feel almost at home here.”

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<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, *The Gift*. New York: Vintage International, 1991, p. 170. Henceforth as *G*.

<sup>9</sup> *SO*, I#21, p. 197.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, I#15, pp. 160-161.

At home? Nabokov always said that his unwillingness to have a house (he didn't acquire real estate even in more than ten years at Cornell) stemmed from the fact that once you've had one, all the rest can be only pathetic imitations, a vain attempt to fill uniquely beautiful memories with banal content. The hotel, juxtaposed with one's "own" house, was in all his books the symbol of unanchored homelessness and the illusory nature of existence. It is a forced heaven and a sign of bitter freedom, in which man, having lost paradise forever, is merely a guest on earth with no reason to accumulate heavy life baggage. Like trains and stations, hotels free one from belonging to a specific place on earth, in exchange connecting all the places of the Nabokovian spectral universe.

In *Glory*, Martin "noted a certain peculiarity about his life: the property that his reveries had of crystallizing and mutating into reality, as previously they had mutated into sleep" (*Glory*, 108–9). And for Vladimir Nabokov the writer, the hotels that were considered, described, symbolized, dreamed over, and lived in *The Defense*, *Glory*, and *King, Queen, Knave* became incarnate in the novel of his own life as the six-story sunny and wonderful Montreux Palace, replacing Russian cozy warmth with Swiss static constancy.

**"A very old Russian friend of ours, now dwelling in Paris, remarked recently when she was here, that one night, forty years ago, in the course of a little quiz at one of her literary parties in Berlin, I, being asked where I would like to live, answered, 'In a large comfortable hotel.'**<sup>11</sup> A real gem in my collection of premonitions and future retrospectives, don't you think?" he smiled with confidence.

"You see," Nabokov continued . . .

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<sup>11</sup> *SO*, I#8, p. 109

I had already grown accustomed to that slow introduction, condescending and simultaneously leading you into the rhythm of his thought, speech, immortality. “Switzerland is the closest place to the heavens on earth. It is an earthly paradise in miniature--urban civilization, a civilized village, eternal snows, Mediterranean climate--and such an ideal combination on a small slice of territory is possible only here. Look at those mountains, that lake, the trees and flowers; at this idyllic tranquility, this beauty of eternity. Switzerland is almost unreal, because it never changes; it is neutral, constant, and infinite.

“Existing in space, at a specific latitude and longitude, with roads, cities, and railroad stations, being at the intersection of all roads, verticals and horizontals (the rue de la Gare is always the central street here), it is simultaneously outside events. This minimal spaciousness reveals a broad expanse of time, especially in a resort city, where space becomes an exclusively temporal phenomenon, not part of life but a vacation from it.

“Switzerland is remarkable because here you are enveloped in a heavenly sense of freedom, on the condition, of course, that you remain a tourist. I am a tourist, a hotel guest, and to the highest degree this creates my anonymity, alienation, and aloofness. I am here and not here simultaneously, which **confirms me in my favorite habit--the habit of freedom.**<sup>12</sup>

“In compressing space to the minimum, time expands infinitely,” he concluded significantly.

“Is that why the Swiss are so fixated on time?” I said with a nod.

“No, not on time, on clocks, the skeleton of time,” Nabokov corrected me. “You see, as I’ve already noted, nothing ever happens here. In other places governments fall, war, earthquake,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., #13, p. 149.

and avalanche roar, flood and fire rumble, revolutions shock and volcanoes erupt, always presenting a not necessarily pleasant but always accurate starting point for calculating time and ages. The Swiss must depend on the accuracy of their **chronometrical**<sup>13</sup> mechanisms to find themselves within time. How else can they distinguish the sixteenth century from the twenty-sixth? They have to count on the most elaborate clock face designs, following the process of human time, reflecting the latest fashions and technological innovations."

Nabokov smiled gently, as if to apologize for his sarcasm about the Swiss, who did not even suspect, poor things, that "applied time – time applied to events, which we measure by means of clocks and calendars" (*SO*, I#19, 185) — in fact had nothing to do with the "true reality" (*ibid.*, I#9, 118). He never apologized to his readers for his scorn, did not apologize to other writers for his arrogance (with the exception of the only great – Alexander Pushkin), in other words, he did not apologize. But he apologized to the Swiss, probably because from his vantage point of genius and eternity contemplating everything temporal and material, he was generous to those who indeed were capable of creating an earthly paradise – boring, may be, but how much more livable than that destructive paradise of Soviet communism.

"So, here I am absolutely free to concentrate on the temporal category, the most important in my opinion for life, and death, and history," Nabokov continued. "**I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet... in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. . . . And the highest enjoyment of timelessness--in a**

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<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. New York: Vintage International, 1992, p. 60.

**landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants.**<sup>14</sup>

“All my heroes, especially those born in Switzerland, are always from mysterious, unreal places ‘selected at random’ – Kinbote in *Pale Fire* is from strange Zemblya, Ada and Van Veen in *Ada* come from Ladoga, Kaluga, Kitezh, Raduga, such Russian place names transported to the Western Hemisphere.

“Place, you know, is a conditional category, it exists only as much as time, memory, and eternity exist. **In some peculiar way Space is merely the waste product of Time.**<sup>15</sup> Thanks to time, Adam Krug [in *Bend Sinister*] returns to the city of his childhood, philosophical discoveries, dead wife, the city that exists geographically but has ceased to exist, renamed by the tyrannical Paduk as totalitarian Padukgrad.”

Nabokov fell silent, meditating heavily on the fate of Krug, probably the most horrible of all that befell his heroes. By cruel chance losing his son, the only remaining bridge between Krug’s former country and Paduk’s present-day, Adam is forced to watch the videotape of the child’s murder. But then his pitying creator liberates his hero from “the senseless agony of his logical fate,”<sup>20</sup> and generously returns him to the author’s consciousness, to the “comparative paradise” of the writer’s study with “the bedside lamp, the sleeping tablets, the glass of milk” (*BS*, 241).

Awakening from his deep meditation, Nabokov went on, “Place is conditional, it can always be changed--from Russia to Padukgrad, through America and Switzerland to my desk. . .

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<sup>14</sup> *SM*, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> V. Nabokov. *Ada, or Ardor*. New York: Vintage International, 1990, p. 541. Henceforth as *Ada*.

. But time can't be changed, it can't be finished, it can only be developed, through the rebirth of the past in a new time, and so on to infinity, adding new turns to the endless spiral.

"In *Ada*, Van Veen did a thorough study of the relationship between time and space and concluded: '**One can be a hater of Space, and a lover of Time.**'<sup>16</sup> In a world of vanishing countries and cultures, murdered children and destroyed adults, only time can overcome losses, separation, and their result, death. Time, real time, always exists in the perspective of history and infinity simultaneously. **Time, though akin to rhythm, is not simply rhythm, which would imply motion--and Time doesn't move. Van's greatest discovery is his perception of Time as the dim hollow between two rhythmic beats, the narrow and bottomless silence between the beats, not the beats themselves, which only embar Time. In this sense human life is not a pulsating heart but the missed heartbeat.**<sup>17</sup> I hope you understand what I am saying?" he asked, with the same gentle condescension.

I understood. I understood that this was why in every Nabokov novel without exception clocks, their faces, their tones, their visibility in physical space are noted by the author, the characters, and the readers--in marking the passage of time, they, these chronometrical mechanisms, create the illusion of immediate reality without which even the most oblique and tangential contact with what we call life is impossible. But counting time "mercilessly," "senselessly," and "trivially" (descriptions of clocks in *Invitation to a Beheading*), they only confuse the essence of real time--eternity, immortality, death--by limiting it to a spatial category.

"Krug . . . wandering through the rooms of the deserted cottage whose two clocks . . . are probably still going, alone, intact, pathetically sticking to man's notion of time after man has

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<sup>16</sup> *Ada*, p. 543

<sup>17</sup> *SO*, I#19, p. 186.

gone” (*BS*, 111), continues the thoughts of Cincinnatus C., written two novels earlier: “not only am I still alive, that is, the sphere of my own self still limits and eclipses my being,”<sup>18</sup> while Cincinnatus in turn agrees with Luzhin, who even earlier “accepted this external life as something inevitable but completely uninteresting.”<sup>19</sup>

“We, poor Spatians, are better adapted . . . to Extension rather than to Duration,”<sup>20</sup> Nabokov said musingly, setting down his empty cup. “Places, clocks, bodies--these are all categories of materialization. They are a constant source of physical imperfection, of numerical and objective count that separates us from the reality of eternity. I have always suspected that **the impersonal darkness on both sides of my life... is caused merely by the walls of time separating me... from the free world of timelessness.**<sup>21</sup> And now, as I sit in this bronze chair, I am completely confident that I was right.

“The ability to fold the magic carpet in any stretch of time is the only way to gain access to immortality. When my little son picked up on a beach **small bits of pottery, still beautiful in glaze and color... I did not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scroll-work fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by her mother a hundred years ago--and so on, until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to**

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<sup>18</sup> Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*. New York: Vintage International, 1989, p. 89. Henceforth as *ITB*.

<sup>19</sup> V. Nabokov. *The Defense*. New York: Vintage International, 1990, p. 95. Henceforth as *LD*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ada*, p. 541.

<sup>21</sup> *SM*, pp. 9-10.

**make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl, broken by some Italian child God knows where and when, and now mended by these rivets of bronze.**"<sup>22</sup>

I dared to interrupt, "The bronze bowl was left in the past, and by these shores, in a new coil of the spiral, its fragments formed a bronze statue."

Nabokov nodded in approval. "**The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free.**"<sup>23</sup> "We've all come out of Gogol's 'Overcoat,'"<sup>24</sup> he said with a smile.

I smiled back, knowing his disparaging attitude toward Dostoevsky but not really knowing how to react to this abrupt switch in the conversation. Apparently, Nabokov had no intention of discussing his literary prejudices, but instead was revealing, with his usual condescension but also with astonishing concern, the background of his characters.

"You see, we've all come out of Russian culture, and my characters have come out of Russian literature, out of *Anna Karenina*, *The Idiot*, *The Diary of a Madman*... We all found ourselves in another age, at another longitude and latitude, tossed onto other shores on the next postrevolutionary coil of the spiral. But the language was our handicap. It was getting in the way of a new transforming hero, preventing this hero from understanding the virtues of a straight and simple line, word, rule, sentence. It metastasized with endless lyrical digressions, fenced and circled itself with parentheses and commas, sprouted semicolons and dashes all over the never-ending volumes, covering all our eleven time zones. Snowdrifts of suffering and excitement prevented the determined and driven individual who was and free from all emotional reflections

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 242.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

<sup>24</sup> "We have all come out of Gogol's 'Overcoat'" is a very famous Russian saying attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky.

from moving on. The useless and impractical knowledge of a Russian intellectual required retooling into better practical skills in **efficient, alabastrine, humane America.**<sup>29</sup>

“Remember Pnin?” continued Nabokov in English: **“He was inept with his hands to a rare degree; but because he could manufacture in a twinkle a one-note mouth organ out of a pea pod, make a flat pebble skip ten times on the surface of a pond, shadowgraph with his knuckles a rabbit (complete with blinking eye), and perform a number of other tame tricks that Russians have up their sleeves, he believed himself endowed with considerable manual and mechanical skill.”**<sup>25</sup>

Just like his Pnin, exiled from the kindness of the communal paradise of Russian literature, Nabokov too had to adjust, conform to other shores, to another language, to the comfortably individualistic Western adult “hell” that replaced his cozy native Russian paradise.

Impassive Nabokov paused to reflect again. “Martin, who had learned early to control his tears and conceal his emotions, astonished his schoolteachers with his insensibility,” I recalled a passage from *Glory* (13). The Russian author most unsympathetic to and scornful of human frailty wore an unabashed mask of indifference--“In America I’m happier than in any other country” (*SO*, I#2, 10). And still . . . he suffered unbearably from the loss of his native tongue, his native home, his native land:

But now thou too must go; just here we part,  
Softest of tongues, my true one, all my own . . .  
And I am left to grope for heart and art

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<sup>25</sup> Nabokov, *Pnin*, in *The Portable Nabokov*. Edited by Page Stegner. New York: Penguin, 1978, p. 367.

And start anew with clumsy tools of stone.<sup>26</sup>

Even the word rodnoi in Russian has overtones of family and closeness that are almost completely lost in English translation as native, familial, own. Like Adam Krug, Nabokov could return to the country of his childhood in time and memory but not in space, forced to replace movement with thought: "One is always at home in one's past" (*SM*, 87).

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov muses: "I wonder, by the way, what would happen if I put in a long distance call [to 24-43, the old phone number of the Nabokovs in Saint Petersburg] from my desk right now? No answer? No such number? No such country?" (*SM*, 182–83).

In the Russian version, *Drugie berega*, he confesses: "Longing for home. It has its clutches, that longing, in a small corner of the world, and it can be pulled away only by killing it. . . . Give me, on any continent, a forest, meadow, and air that resemble the province of Saint Petersburg, and my soul gets turned inside out."<sup>27</sup>

"He didn't love . . . his country because he had lost it. But he loved [it] most deeply in [its] loss, and his love is most alive in the imagining . . . of the Russia he will never see again. He loved the chance of loss, he loved what he could lose, which is perhaps what we really love in anyone or anything," explains Michael Wood, a literary scholar from Princeton University. And "that loss is irredeemable, that loss goes on and on."<sup>28</sup>

As pain, as life, as death. . . .

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<sup>26</sup> V. Nabokov. "Softest of Tongues," quoted in Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour's book *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the "First" Emigration*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> V. Nabokov. *Drugie berega*. In Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh*. Moscow: Pravda, 1990, pp. 270–71.

<sup>28</sup> Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996, pp. 96, 94.

If Nabokov had not been Russian but a purely Western individual, he would not have perceived life on the other shore as a cruel necessity. Then it would have been an indisputable given, with no longing for the paradisiacal past, his homeland, his home. But it is precisely that unforgettable, unhealing wound of loss, the source of constant pain that determined the immortality of the writer and his books.

What can be said of a paradise that is not lost, for it becomes paradise only once it is no longer there? Deprived of Russia, Nabokov loved it even more and learned to overcome the pain in endless reminiscences of Zemblya, Kaluga, Ladoga that moved from novel to novel, confirming Michael Wood's "lost love" theory: "it is all a matter of love: the more you love a memory, the stronger and stranger it is. I think it's natural that I have a more passionate affection for my old memories, the memories of my childhood" (*SO*, I#2, 12).

According to Nabokov, loss--this death of hopes and dreams--could be overcome by an aptly directed, precisely calculated spiral repetition of already familiar themes, images, situations, only bettered, improved, straightened, "happyfied": "pattern is a redemption of loss, and perhaps the only redemption of loss there is."<sup>29</sup>

The exploit of death--the Russian end--became Nabokov's exploit of life--the Western wellspring. Rewriting Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy in accordance with his own sobering experience of Westernization, he escapes the vicious circle of misery sketched by Russian cultural tradition.

Nabokov took on the most difficult task of all his riddles--logically, constructively, like a chess problem or a complicated puzzle, to solve the riddle of the circled composition of Russian

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 94.

unhappiness, mistaken for spiritual uniqueness. He ventured to find a defense from the constantly repeating thematic pattern of Russian literature and Russian life, the basis of which is patient pain, thunderous revolution, heroic death. Nabokov had to remake, to fix this clock mechanism, broken many times over, this wrecked time machine with worn out bits and batteries--this Russian theme of life for the sake of death, in which measured happiness was not even a desirable constant.

**"In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free,"** he seemed to completely forget about my presence.

Banishing his Russian heroes from their all-forgiving culture, not merely tolerant of pain but brought up on it, growing and flourishing in suffering, taking away the comfort of the release brought by a heroic escape, Nabokov makes them begin a new life much more horrible than the one from which compassionate Russian literature had so generously protected them: merciless Western life after merciful Russian death. Just as Nabokov himself once was, on the new, contemporary coil of the spiral, they are forced to adjust to the new, much more difficult conditions of open space, freedom of choice, responsibility for one's fate, and the necessity of making one's own decisions. He deprives them of the comfort of their native tongue, the Russian coziness of parentheses, colons, dashes, and commas behind which one can hide as if behind a gate, hunker down behind a fence, buffered from life's wind, blanketed by fluffy snow as if it were an eiderdown--we'll wait it out, winter over, survive till better times . . .

"And a sentence begun somewhere once upon a time in another time and space spins and turns and twists around itself in the typical ring architecture of a Russian village, in the ring composition of *Dead Souls*,<sup>36</sup> and you can't see the beginning from the end, and only the familiar

bell finishes its jingle, and here we are in a different dimension, far away and still in the same place. Striving to get from the wheel to the flying troika, from war to peace, from Pushkin to Onegin, we describe an arc and come back to the beginning, to the wheel and to Pushkin.<sup>37</sup>

“And then, bored by the measured process of evolution, we rush to tear the ring with thunderous revolution, sweeping everything in its path. And then, resting from the shocks, we wait again for centuries for spring to come and the blizzard to pass outside the window, beyond the line, in the other, rectilinear world.

“There a naked man on bare soil would not rhyme dolya (fate, lot) with volya (freedom, will)<sup>30</sup> as if they were synonyms, does not play up to Nature and, covered head to toe, hope for pity from Her. He marches into the wind, takes decisions and executes them, despite the bad weather and the poor harvest. . . .<sup>39</sup> Western man, econo- and English-speaking, rectilinear, who has no place to hide in this bare and rational land, has no choice but to conquer the land rationally and egotistically. He takes his Western fate in his masterful, willful hands and proves that ‘**All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike.**’<sup>31</sup> (The only thing you Russians know how to do is suffer!)

“The Western individual is practical, he doesn’t seek relief in madness, revolution, death, suicide, or escape into the void. He does not elevate pain and suffering into the meaning and basis of existence. For him death is not a way out, not a grand exploit of relief--he lives from day to day, from yesterday to today, from today to tomorrow, and so on to the end, slowly, forced to

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<sup>30</sup> Abram Tertz, *Strolls with Pushkin*. Translated by Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Slava I. Yastremski. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993, pp. 72-73.

<sup>31</sup> This opening phrase of *Ada, or Ardor* is a paraphrase of Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* famous beginning, "All happy families are pretty much the same, all unhappy families are unhappy in their own way."

experience the ordinariness and triteness of life as the evolutionary given of the human condition."

Followers of Nabokov and heirs of Poprishchin (Kinbote in *Pale Fire*), Karenina and Levin (Ada and Van Veen in *Ada, or Ardor*), Prince Myshkin (Cincinnatus C. in *Invitation to a Beheading*), and Ivanov (Timofey Pnin in *Pnin*), they enter into misery and misfortune as if these were not merely a result of hardships but the given of their existence.<sup>32</sup> Their life begins in that interface of death-eternity where the heroes of classical Russian literature ended theirs, at the moment when Poprishchin and Myshkin finally got rid of life. For Nabokov death is not only an end, it is the start of pain.

The forever-young Lolita once observed with all seriousness, "You know, what's so dreadful about dying is that you are completely on your own,"<sup>33</sup> but truth be told, in Western living you are equally on your own. . . . On that same painful coil the happiness of Ada and Van Veen is no less horrible than Anna Karenina's tragic end--the novel's title speaks for itself (ad is Russian for hell). Their happiness is even more horrible, it is un-happiness, madness: trapped in the branches of a complex genealogical tree, the relationship of the willful cousins was clear only to themselves--incestuous love, cruel in its absolute nature, terrible in its urgent determination to be happy at any cost. Because it is "in other more deeply moral worlds than this pellet of muck, there might exist restraints, principles, transcendental consolations, and even a certain pride in making happy someone one does not really love; but on this planet Lucettes are doomed" (*Ada*, 498).

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<sup>32</sup> Poprishchin is a crazy hero of Nikolai Gogol's story "Diary of a Madman." Konstantin Levin is one of the main characters in Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*. Prince Myshkin is a hero of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*. Nikolai Ivanov is a character from Anton Chekhov's eponymous play *Ivanov*.

<sup>33</sup> V. Nabokov. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage International, 1989, p. 284.

Hostages to their individual passions, Ada and Van can keep a happy balance only in their tight world of incest, centered completely on each other, and for that they are compelled to tease their younger sister, Lucette, to death. And the difference between the Veens, polozhitelnye (positive) characters, and Humbert [*Lolita*], an otritsatelnyi (negative) character, was just that their incest was an act of free will for both, while underage and inexperienced Lolita was manipulated into a romance with her stepfather.

In our age of “the mug of modernism” (*G*, 149) this obvious hell can be called a paradise. In this age, in fact, one can be even proud of the ability to adjust to that hell, because in the cold world of banal rationality happiness is what a person invents for himself; how happy he decides to assess his life.

“I will let you on a little secret,” Nabokov whispered, leaning closer, “You see, Humbert Humbert is horrible, because he himself believes he is horrible, while the witty Clare Quilty, an impotent lover of lovely girls, instead inspires those girls’ unwavering admiration. Remember the pedophilic Gaston Godin: **his existence had such a queer bearing on Humbert’s case. There he was, devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life, triumphantly ignorant of the English language--there he was in priggish New England, crooned over by the old and caressed by the young--oh, having a grand time and fooling everybody; and here was**<sup>34</sup> Humbert...”

We were the only ones left in the music room. The conversation, like the sunny day, was drawing to a close. It was time to say good-bye, thank him, and leave...

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

"For a Russian hero," Nabokov said, stopping me, "death is not simply a salvation, but the justification for his petty, miserable, suffering life. After all, pain for us"--he paused and corrected himself--"for you," and after another pause, "for them, is a reward and suffering is a holiday. Look at how they die, leave, lose their minds, with the pathos of a tragic character--'I'll die, and then they'll. . . . They didn't understand me, they didn't appreciate me'--Bashmachkin, the Karamazovs, Ivan Ilyich."<sup>35</sup>

Feeling sympathy for the heroes of the Russian classics, he did not forgive them their weakness and nonresistance: "Do you think you know the horror of suffering, real pain? I'll show you real pain, when even death holds no promise of an end to it!"

"But how I don't want to die! My soul has burrowed under the pillow. Oh, I don't want to! It will be cold getting out of my warm body. I don't want to... wait a while... let me doze some more" (*ITB*, 26), cries out Cincinnatus C. But having overcome the cold uncertainty of immortality, he bravely makes "his way in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (*ibid.*, 223).

Adam Krug after all his trials "comfortably returns unto the bosom of his maker" (*BS*, xix).

Pnin, perhaps the character Nabokov respected the most, who dared to be kinder and braver than the author (so unusual a feature that the entire novel about him was included in the anthology *The Portable Nabokov*), does not give in to humiliation and proudly rides off into nothingness.

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<sup>35</sup> Akakii Akakievich Bashmachkin is petty clerk in Nikolai Gogol's novella "The Overcoat." Ivan Ilyich is a character of Leo Tolstoy's story "Death of Ivan Ilyich."

Luzhin does not go mad from chess, as the critics have it: born into the madness of life with its insoluble problems at every step, “realizing that he had got stuck, that he had lost his way in one of the combinations he had so recently pondered, [he] made a desperate attempt to free himself, to break out somewhere” (*LD*, 140). He thus finds the only brilliant defense against life’s madness--nonexistence.

And Nabokov, who spent his life rewriting the heroes of Russian literature in the hope of making his own “favorite creatures, [his] resplendent characters--in *The Gift*, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, in *Ada*, in *Glory*, et cetera... victors in the long run” (*SO*, I#19, 193), to reward them with a good ending for their courage to live, himself settled in the illusory paradise of Switzerland to finally compose the paradisiacal *Ada* with its absolute formula for individual happiness--“All happy families are more or less dissimilar”:

. . . if there were no future, then one had the right of making up a future, and in that case one’s very own future did exist, insofar as one existed oneself. (*Ada*, 585)

And fully in the spirit of Nabokovian infinity, all this had turned out to be yet another coil in the eternal spiral--repeating the writer’s experience, his heroes forestalled Russia's own post-Soviet fate: Cincinnatus, like you and I, had to crawl out of the lazy consciousness of Russian literature, out of Ilya Ilyich Oblomov who finally had to get up, take off his robe, make decisions and become Andrei Stoltz.<sup>36</sup>

The fact that we, unlike Nabokov, who considered his pre-emigration life ideal, wanted Western calculating order in our own country and strove to exchange well-meaning Oblomov for

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<sup>36</sup> Ilya Ilyich Oblomov is a hero of Alexander Goncharov's novel *Oblomov*. Landowner Oblomov is considered to be an epitome of the Russian laziness, complacency, patience. Andrei Stoltz is Oblomov's best friend, of the German descent, he is business-like and entrepreneurial. Andrei spends the whole novel convincing Oblomov to change his lazy life style.

enterprising Stoltz did not ease our awkward adjustment to the cruel, measured, hollow and unforgiving laws of capitalism, in which only the strongest survives. It simply stresses the subordination of reality to eternity (and art): Luzhin, Cincinnatus C., Pnin, Kinbote, Van Veen, and Ada will remain figments of artistic imagination in their immortality as they have done their suffering, while we must live on in the transitional period from socialism to capitalism, totalitarianism to democracy, spiritual values to material ones, all-encompassing nature to rationality, from... to....

Nabokov went on slowly: "And you will have to accept that pain is not an exploit, not a constant celebration, not a relapse, but an ordinary condition, the trivial norm of human existence. Death may be a way out, but without fanfare, thunder, sensationalism, and martyr's crown, it is not a happy escape but an almost inconspicuous, quiet disappearance, disintegration, a release not forever but for a time from the cruel horror of life until its next beginning, the new, evolutionary coil of the spiral.

**"Death is either the instantaneous gaining of perfect knowledge . . . or absolute nothingness, nichto. . . ."**<sup>37</sup> And what on earth does it matter? . . . **Death is but a question of style,**<sup>38</sup> Nabokov concluded in English.

He was lost in thought again. His death--"a mere literary device,"<sup>39</sup> one of the most exquisite in Russian literature--the Montreux Palace, a gem of modernism, his nonchalant bronze figure inside, Vladimir Nabokov écrivain on his tombstone--was still not as seamless as Pushkin's end (the only classic author on whom Nabokov wrote commentary without rewriting),

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<sup>37</sup> *BS*, p. 175

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

which was less stylized but more stylish, perfectly in tune with Pushkin's genius for elegance, humor and taste--a Frenchman, a beauty, a duel, a button, an anecdote--the sun of Russian poetry.

The sun set, spangling the lake, and its last dying reflections glittered on the windows of the Palace, casting an evening glow that softened the yellow of the cornices. Politely letting me know that my audience was over, Nabokov bade me a brief farewell and invited to drop in if I was ever in the neighborhood again.

I really wanted to ask him what our conversation had meant, why he had spoken to me about things he usually concealed carefully and hid on the smooth, brilliant surface of his novels, with "the mirror-like angles of his clear but weirdly misleading sentences" (SM, 225), why he had decided to speak to me in Russian, his intimate, sacred, native language, why . . .

But I was no longer there.

Nabokov sat alone, bronze, silent, indifferently gazing off to the side, into eternity, the great and arrogant Nabokov, author of *Lolita* and *Speak, Memory*, *Onegin* and *Gogol*, *Ada* and *Pale Fire*, Nabokov who translated, rewrote, added forewords, commentaries, and indexes to his novels, Nabokov who explained everything but revealed nothing, the scornful and brilliant classic of our time, totally immersed in his monumental exclusivity.

#### AFTERWORD

Of all the characters that a great artist creates, his readers  
are the best.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian  
Literature*

In the tradition of Herman (*Despair*), V. (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*), Humbert Humbert (*Lolita*), Kinbote (*Pale Fire*), and all Nabokov's characters who are made to tell their own tale, I too, after narrating mine, was returned unto the bosom of my maker, to the beginning of my story to stand in front of the bronze statue,<sup>40</sup> wondering whether this conversation had taken place at all.

But whether it did or did not happen is not for me to decide: an obedient protagonist of a commentary to eternity, which Nabokov made up to pass up this very eternity, I had to follow the logic of his plot.

However, in order to make it easier on you, reader, I marked out some quotations, which originally appeared in his earlier published books. Nabokov, no doubt, would not have approved, as he once said, "the reader has to work in his turn. . . . Art is difficult" (*SO*, I#9, 115). He would have preferred you to ponder and try to recall where this is or that phrase came from, but I, using my prerogative as a formal narrator, dared to disregard the will of my author.

I was unable to find everything we talked about in the body of his works, but this I am sure, was Nabokov's intention, a literary trick, consistent with his usual "introductions to" and "notes on," designed as brilliant chess problems in their endless mirror-like reflections: it seems that the answer is almost found, but it is not nearly enough to solve the original problem, so you

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<sup>40</sup> This monument was installed in the Montreux Palace lobby for Nabokov's centennial in 1999, just a few months before I visited with him. It was the work of Alexander and Phillip Rukavishnikov, father and son from a long-lasting dynasty of sculptors, which started at the turn of the last century with the sculptor Mitrofan Rukavishnikov, a distant relative of Vladimir Nabokov's family.

are left to solve the reflection of the original, and then the reflection of the reflection, and so it continues, to infinity.

The only thing he knew for sure was that from time immemorial he had been playing chess – and in the darkness of his memory, as in two mirrors reflecting a candle, there was only a vista of converging lights with Luzhin sitting at a chessboard, and again Luzhin at a chessboard, only smaller, and then smaller still, and so on an infinity of times. (*LD*, 135)

In the magician's wonderlands, his critics are as helpless as Alice on the corkscrew path to the garden: the closer we try to get to Nabokov, the further the answers recede. Always thinking the answer is at hand we come to see that our hopes for clarity will always be dashed:

An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole universe but when he has finished he realizes that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a 'self' remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections, like those advertisements which depict a girl holding a picture of herself holding a picture of herself holding a picture that only coarse printing prevents one's eye from making out. (*SM*, 254)

Since our "I" is condemned to remain forever outside the bounds of Nabokov's universe, there is only one solution, I found, to his "mirror of being" (*BS*, xii) riddle--Vladimir Nabokov himself. The writer, who will never, either in prefaces, or in conclusions, or in forewords, or in commentaries, or even in conversations, explain to you anything that you are unable to understand yourself: "My inventions, my circles, my special islands are infinitely safe from exasperated readers" (*SO*, A#4, 241). And if by chance he chooses to reveal a few of his secrets, he will immediately add, "Nor have I ever yielded to the wild desire to thank a benevolent critic--or at least to express somehow my tender awareness of this or that friendly writer's sympathy

and understanding, which in some extraordinary way seem always to coincide with talent and originality, an interesting, though not quite inexplicable phenomenon" (*ibid.*).

He then will promptly remind you that all phenomena are illusory anyway; that the boundary between reality and art is deceptive and indistinct. As it is indistinguishable between life and death, happiness and unhappiness, time and space, and so on and so forth--spirally, endlessly, eternally . . .

I think that what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture: *The Artist's Studio* by Van Bock. (*SO*, I#6, 72–73)

