

**Leona Toker**

**THE EXILE'S JOY**

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The year 2011 saw the publication of the book *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* by Lila Azam Zanganeh,<sup>1</sup> a lyrical record of the happiness that Nabokov's texts and the images associated with his life produce in an appreciative reader. It is perhaps not accidental that this paean to happiness came from a second-generation Iranian refugee, and was endorsed by Salman Rushdie, an emigrant turned fugitive as "A joyful response to the joy that inspired all of Nabokov's art." Most of Nabokov's readers know how his works strike a chord in one's mind and feelings, but it seems to take an exile (every emigrant or refugee, of the first or the subsequent generations, is to some degree — often a large degree — an exile) to resonate with the specific kind of joy that falls to an exile's lot. This paper is devoted not to the effect of Nabokov's sense of joy on the reader but to the *theme* of joy, of happiness, in his writing of the 1920s and the early 1930s.

It is usually thought that in the absence of political activism émigré life is haunted by nostalgia and a threat of depressiveness. What is seldom noted is the exhilaration of weightlessness that can be experienced by a young exile, especially one who is *not* trying to integrate into the society of the host country. This seems to have been Vladimir

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<sup>1</sup> Zanganeh, *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness* (New York: Norton, 2011).

Nabokov's experience during the nineteen twenties and the early nineteen thirties in Berlin.

### **Cambridge**

During Nabokov's earlier student days in Cambridge, his sense of life seem to have been more complicated in this respect: partly owing to the Anglophile tastes of his childhood home, he had come prepared to love, yet felt, was made to feel, a foreigner, not quite part of the scene, mildly admiring, yet somewhat content with inner independence. On his first arrival, a foreign destination may seem unreal to a newcomer: "something of a greenhouse wafts from the unfamiliar trees, and all the birds seem as if on springs, and the sunset looks no better than a rather dry watercolor," writes Nabokov in the 1921 essay "Cambridge."<sup>2</sup> Yet his prolonged gaze brings about not a dull familiarity but affection for the town's hushed evening streets, its smells, its willows and elms, and the river Cam with a "pearl-grey arched bridge." The sound of Cambridge bells "having hung like a magic net above the crenellated towers for a few moments," melts lingeringly "into the narrow, misty lanes, into the beautiful night sky, into my heart."<sup>3</sup>

Happiness is one of the prominent themes of Nabokov's early writing. Assertions that he is happy appear in his letters from Cambridge: a letter to his mother about longing for Vyra ends in the words "I am infinitely happy, and so agitated and sad today."<sup>4</sup> Happiness is the background of other feelings, including melancholy and longing. Yet Nabokov did have bouts of sadness in his student days. Three and a half decades later, when the now famous author of *Lolita* was asked about Trinity College, he paid it a doubtful compliment: "It was the perfect atmosphere within which to keep up my Russian,"<sup>5</sup> suggesting memories of alienation, possibly influenced, retroactively, by the futile revisiting of Cambridge as part of the attempts to find a job in England in 1938–1939. In his answer to the interviewer's next question Nabokov suggested a contrast: "in

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<sup>2</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews, and Letters to the Editor*, ed. Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy (New York: Knopf, 2019), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 278.

America, [he] was at home immediately.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, in a March 19, 1941 letter to his wife from Wellesley, at a moment when he wished to write something new in Russian, Nabokov reported, “My Cambridge moods are somehow coming back to me.”<sup>7</sup>

The complex Cambridge moods must have included intermittent alienation and insecurity about the future, converging into a painful sense of unreality. In the essay “Cambridge,” at customary five o’clock teas, young Nabokov’s fellow students flatten into two-dimensional images:

Sometimes I sit in a corner and look out on all these smooth, no doubt very pleasant faces, but somehow always reminding me of a shaving soap advertisement, and then I suddenly become so bored, so weary, that I almost want to howl to break the windows. . . . You might be speaking to a friend about this or that, about strikes and steeplechases, when you ingenuously blurt out that you feel you’d give every drop of blood to see again some bog near Petersburg — but to utter such thoughts is indecent; he’ll look at you as if you’d whistled in a church.<sup>8</sup>

It may be precisely because of this sense of not belonging that a crisp joy of freedom would puncture the melancholy moods, moving from the background to the foreground of experience. In a November 25, 1921 letter to his mother, Nabokov includes a poem meant to show that his mood “is as radiant as ever”<sup>9</sup> (“настроение у меня всегда радостное.”<sup>10</sup> The poem expresses the happiness of the freedom that can be found in solitude and appreciation of the world:

Есть в одиночестве свобода, и сладость в вымыслах благих. Звезду, снежинку, каплю меду	In solitude there is a freedom and sweetness in blessed imaginings A star, a snowflake, a stop of honey
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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, trans. and ed. Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd, London: Penguin, 2014, p. 444.

<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 187.

<sup>10</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: Russkie gody*, trans. Galina Lapina (St. Petersburg: “Symposium,” 2001), p. 223.

<p>я заключаю в стих.</p> <p>И еженочно умирая, я рад воскреснуть в должный час, и новый день — росинка рая, а прошлый день — алмаз.<sup>11</sup></p>	<p>I enclose in verse.</p> <p>Dying nightly, I am glad to rise again at the appointed hour The next day is the dewdrop of paradise and the day past, a diamond.<sup>12</sup></p>
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In 1926 Nabokov would return to Cambridge in memory and compose “The University Poem,” which confirms his point about “keep[ing] up his Russian” in Cambridge by leaning towards *Eugene Onegin* rhythms rather than those of English poetry. The poem focuses on the Russian student’s relationship with a young Englishwoman in Cambridge, one who seems to have had similar stories with others before him — a former student tells the speaker about his infatuation with a woman in Cambridge: his love for her somehow waned, and whatever he was fascinated by before palled on him in the end. The woman turns out to be the speaker’s current lady-friend. The speaker lodges in a Cambridge house where Byron once lived and held a bear on the chain, but Nabokov’s own preference is for Keats. The name of his lady-friend in the poem is Violet, which may have been chosen in memory of the “fast-fading violets” in Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”: not only does the 27 year-old Violet have to worry about soon reaching the age that at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century signified being left on the shelf, but it is love itself, for the woman as well as for the history-suffused town and its glorious university, that fades when time comes to commence life anew. Their acquaintance starts by Violet’s noting that the speaker is Russian; it ends by his packing for departure, tennis racket in a frame, the way his predecessors had departed on completing their degrees. Cambridge love-stories would perhaps be significantly revised with the start of the co-ed era, and then revised again in the era of “me too.” But when Nabokov wrote “The Cambridge Poem,” he was recently married and happy despite turbulent emotions in the Weimar Berlin. He seems to have been a recipient of frequently recurring moments of mysterious joy.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 188.

## **Berlin**

In the first years of exile, Nabokov shared his family's belief that the Bolshevik rule would be short-lived and they would return to "the hospitable, remorseful, racemosa-blooming Russia."<sup>13</sup> In a talk given in the mid-1920s, where the young Nabokov represents his times as "romantic in the highest degree, spiritually beautiful, and physically comfortable" despite the recent war, he expresses a belief that "the whiff of revolution, ... having appeared by chance, will disappear by chance, as has already happened a thousand times in human history. In Russia, simpleminded communism will be replaced by something more intelligent, and in a hundred years only historians will know the very boring Mr. Ulyanov."<sup>14</sup> Nabokov could not, however, imagine what shapes the so-called Second Russian Revolution would take in the 1990s, what its aftermath would be, and how he would be read in his transformed homeland.<sup>15</sup>

A few years went by, and Nabokov's article "Iubilei," published in the newspaper *Rul'* on November 11, 1927 no longer expressed the above expectation. Here the 28 year-old V. Sirin comments on the tenth anniversary of the October coup in Russia by calling on his fellow expatriates to celebrate the jubilee of their own freedom. He admits his nostalgia for Russia and implicitly compares himself to a Roman soldier who pitches a tent in a remote desert, turning his tent into Rome. Yet his wanderings are not cheerless: a longing for the motherland "does not always prevent our enjoying an alien country, a refined solitude in the alien electric night, on a bridge, in a square, in a station."<sup>16</sup> Nostalgia need not take precedence over such experience, though it may affect its coloring.

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<sup>13</sup> Nabokov, *King, Queen, Knave*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. vii.

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> On the late-Soviet and post-Soviet status of Nabokov and his works in Russia, ranging from vulgarization to canonization, see Leving, "Plaster, Marble, Canon: The Vindication of Nabokov in Post-Soviet Russia." *Urbandus* 10 (2007): 101–22.

<sup>16</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 62. Luke Parker associates the words "electric night" with Berlin's nocturnal shop displays; see Parker "The Shop Window Quality of Things: 1920s Weimar Surface Culture in Nabokov's *Korol', dama, valet*." *Slavic Review* 77.2 (2018): 394–95. However, as the collocation with "on a bridge" suggests, these words may have a broader cityscape reference.

Nabokov was not alone feeling the exile's joy. Similar happiness is recorded by the émigré poet Dovid Knut (1900–1955), in particular in the poem “Да, я повинен в непомерном счастье” (“Yes, I am guilty of an exorbitant happiness”)<sup>17</sup> written in the same year, 1927. It took considerable courage to express such sentiments, so unlike those of the dominant “Paris note” of Russian émigré literature.<sup>18</sup> Dovid Knut, however, was closer to the circle of Nabokov's friend Vladislav Khodasevich than to that of Georgy Adamovich and Georgy Ivanov, who presided over the Paris Note.<sup>19</sup>

It may well be that despite Nabokov's critical representation of the middle-class German environment, the atmosphere of the Weimar-Republic Berlin may have contributed to the sense of an expatriate's freedom,<sup>20</sup> more than the atmosphere of Paris, where Russian writers, traditionally invested in the French language and culture, were more susceptible to the influence of their avant-garde contemporaries and to reciprocal peer pressures. Suggestively, the protagonist of Elie Wiesel novel *The Testament*, Paltiel Kossover, a Yiddish poet and a draft-avoiding refugee from a Hungarian Jewish shtetl, recalls interbellum Berlin as a favorable setting for happiness and artistic freedom:

I was happy, I'm not ashamed to confess. I was as happy, that is, as the next person. Berlin 1928: even the unhappy were happy.

Happy? I am exaggerating, of course. Let's say, I was in a good mood. We were having a good time and we were amusing. We were living in the very midst

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<sup>17</sup> Dovid Knut *Sobranie sochinenii*. 2 vols. Ed. Vladimir Khazan. Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997, I: 103.

<sup>18</sup> See Aleksandr Dolinin, *Istinnnaia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina: Raboty o Nabokove* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2004), pp. 239–45. “The concept of the ‘Paris note’” is ascribed to the poet Boris Poplavsky. Its features are “pessimism, frequent references to death and boredom, solitude and anxiety, stylistic and compositional ‘simplicity,’ and confessional discourse at the expense of imagination” (Leonid Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris: Russian Émigré Literature and French Modernism*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2003, p. 26). Brian Boyd, who likewise points to Nabokov's difference from this trend, describes “the Paris note” in terms of “the despair of exile, the anguish of the modern soul, too heartfelt to heed form and somehow truer and more sincere as its verse approached the artlessness of a diary” (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 344).

<sup>19</sup> Nabokov's relationship with Adamovich and his disciples was hostile, but there were episodes of truce, e.g., in February 1936 (see Vladimir Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, p. 257 — the letter of February 13, 1936).

<sup>20</sup> On the positive aspects of Nabokov's relationship to German culture, see Stanislav Shvabrin, “Berlin,” in David M. Bethea and Siggy Frank, eds. *Vladimir Nabokov in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 87–93.

of a farce. The cabarets, the humorists and caricaturists set the tone: those who did not join the laughter were laughable.

Germany in defeat gave the impression that on its soil everything was permissible except taking oneself seriously. Idols were smashed, clergymen defrocked, the sacred was ridiculed and, to get a laugh, laughter was sanctified.<sup>21</sup>

Berlin (of the 1920s), says Kossover in his memoir, a confession written, as it were, in a Soviet interrogation prison, “was the ideal place for self-liberation.”<sup>22</sup>

To an anonymous author of a sketch that prefaced Nabokov’s essay “Les Écrivains et l’époque” in the journal *Le Mois* in the summer of 1931, “Vladimir Nabokoff,” dressed always “nonchalantly” but with a “typically English elegance”<sup>23</sup> and looking more English than Russian, seemed “invulnerable” because of his “avid interest in life,”<sup>24</sup> a formulation amply borne out by the imagery of the essay that follows. There was still no way of knowing how long such invulnerability would last.

### ***The Theme of Happiness in Sirin’s Early Fiction***

The 1924 working title of Nabokov’s unfinished first novel was “Happiness” (“Schastie”); the project was abandoned as in the spring of 1925 the impulse for it transformed itself into the writing of *Mashen’ka* (published in 1926). The choice of the new title suggests that Nabokov would not anchor happiness in memories of the past.<sup>25</sup> “Not of the past, my love, do I wish to speak to you,” says the narrator of “The Letter that Never Reached Russia,”<sup>26</sup> a fragment of “Happiness,” originally published in 1925 as “Pis’mo v Rossiyu.” (1925). The “Letter” describes to the speaker’s lost beloved the

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<sup>21</sup> Elie Wiesel, *The Testament*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Summit, 1981), p. 110.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> “Un Portrait: Vladimir Nabokoff Sirine, l’amoureux de la vie,” *Le Mois* #6 (1931): 140.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>25</sup> Six years after the publication of *Mashen’ka*, a novel entitled *Schastie* (Happiness) was published by the Paris émigré writer Iurii Fel’zen (Nikolai Freudenstein), who would perish in Auschwitz in 1943. Leonid Livak believes that the character of the writer Zegelkrantz in Nabokov’s 1932–1933 *Kamera Obscura* is based on Fel’zen; see Livak, *How It Was Done in Paris*, pp. 121–23.

<sup>26</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 137.

nocturnal sights of Berlin and ends in a way that anticipates the joy of a foreign electric night mentioned in “Iubilei”:

Listen: I am ideally happy. My happiness is a kind of challenge. As I wander along the streets and the squares and the paths by the canal, absently sensing the lips of dampness through my worn soles, I carry proudly my ineffable happiness. The centuries will roll by, and schoolboys will yawn over the history of our upheavals; everything will pass, but my happiness, dear, my happiness will remain, in the moist reflection of a streetlamp, in the cautious bend of stone steps that descend into the canal’s black waters, in the smiles of a dancing couple, in everything with which God so generously surrounds human loneliness.<sup>27</sup>

In the Nabokovian context, the English title, “A Letter that Never Reached Russia,” may mean a living, persistent experience — in 1943 Nabokov would say to a Wellesley interviewer that he disliked anything that had to do with mailing letters: “this is the death of a letter. You kill it by posting it.”<sup>28</sup> The reason why the letter about longing as part of happiness “never reached Russia” is, it seems, not Soviet per frustrations but the speaker’s reluctance to turn this record of happiness into a dead leaf.

In some of Nabokov’s early texts, the bursts of happiness stem not from diffuse romantic moods but from love for a specific person. The narrator of Nabokov’s 1924 story “Thunderstorm” falls asleep happy, “exhausted by the happiness of my day,” he says, “the happiness I cannot describe in writing, and my dream was full of you.”<sup>29</sup> Sometimes the happiness is the joy of the *promise* of love. As the promise has been fulfilled, “from that very day when you came to me masked, I’ve been wonderfully happy, it’s been my soul’s golden age,”<sup>30</sup> Nabokov writes to Véra in reference to a literary event devoted to pleasure and suffering, “I don’t know ‘pleasure’ and ‘suffering,’ I only know ‘happiness’ and ‘happiness,’ i.e. ‘the thought of you’ and ‘you yourself.’”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>28</sup> Nabokov, *Think, Write, Speak*, p. 210.

<sup>29</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 87.

<sup>30</sup> Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, p. 117 (letter of July 4, 1926).

<sup>31</sup> Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, pp. 83–83 (letter of June 17, 1926).



Two days later Nabokov quotes Pushkin's letter to P. V. Nashchokin: "They say that misfortune is a good school. Yes, true. But happiness is the best university."<sup>32</sup>

Joy in the insignificant and perhaps not classically beautiful images of urban life is expressed in the 1925 story "A Guide to Berlin," which ends on a note of happiness at the thought that the present moment will remain in "somebody's future recollection."<sup>33</sup> Even the story "The Fight," that represents rather distressing human realities, conveys "a joyous celebration of life"<sup>34</sup> by its very imagery, its interplay of light and shadow.

And yet Berlin was also the place where Nabokov's father had been murdered by the ultra-right terrorist in 1922, the town which his now destitute family had to leave for Prague so that his mother could at least receive a small pension from the Czech government, and where the Russian diaspora, his main audience, started dwindling already in the mid-1920s because of the economic depression, the background for Nabokov's 1926 play *The Man from the USSR*.

In Dickens's *Martin Chuzzlewit* there is a character who undertakes trials and hardships because, he thinks, there is no credit in being "jolly" when one has it good. Nabokov, indeed, can be granted credit for cherishing and fostering joy amidst emotional and financial challenges — before (and to some extent even after) they threatened to overwhelm him in 1937–1940. Indeed, in his early work the recurrent theme of ineffable, invincible happiness is framed by the attitude of "in despite." It is felt in "Iubilei," and in "A Guide to Berlin": at the end of that story we learn that the narrator is a wounded war veteran with an "empty right sleeve and scarred face,"<sup>35</sup> for whom the minutiae of peacetime life, however unglamorous, are a happy return to normalcy (a pattern to be repeated in the portrayal of shell-shocked Dick Schiller and his wounded veteran friend in *Lolita*). Often associated with the exhilaration of young energies, happiness is cultivated even though the world around the protagonists grows grimmer and more dangerous. Youth, beauty, nature, life-drive have their own dynamics; flowing with them detaches one from the insistent hostility of the world beyond the self (the protagonist of Nabokov's 1933

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<sup>32</sup> Nabokov, *Letters to Véra*, p. 86 (letter of June 19, 1926).

<sup>33</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 160.

<sup>34</sup> Julian W. Connolly, "'The Play of Light and Shadow in 'The Fight,'" In *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, ed. Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993), p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 160.

story “The Admiralty Spire,” painfully in love, barely notices the February Revolution of 1917). The joy becomes even more precious when the signals from outside one’s emotional realities point to its fragility.

This tenuous quality of happiness is evident as early as in Nabokov’s short story “Sounds,” written in 1923 but published only posthumously, probably because the prototype of the married lady with whom the young protagonist-narrator is in love could have been too easily recognized by Nabokov’s cohorts in the twenties. The protagonist is happy before and after their ways part: he feels that she is not his only lover — he is loved, reciprocally, by “the entire earth.”<sup>36</sup> This thought will be continued in the story “Beneficence” (“Blagost”) written half a year later (in March 1924), where it transforms into the ethically tinged statement that the narrator, having seen ordinary Berliners’ kindness to each other, finds joy not only in the *belle dame sans merci* with whom he is in love but in the whole world around him:

Here I became aware of the world’s tenderness, the profound beneficence of all that surrounded me, the blissful bond between me and all of creation, and I realized that the joy I had sought in you was not only secreted within you, but breathed around me everywhere, in the speeding street sounds, in the hem of a comically lifted skirt, in the metallic yet tender drone of the wind, in the autumn clouds bloated with rain. I realized that the world does not represent a struggle at all, or a predaceous sequence of chance events, but shimmering bliss, beneficent trepidation, a gift bestowed on us and unappreciated.<sup>37</sup>

In “Sounds” the connection with the earth that the young protagonist feels is, rather, a variant of the romantic unity of imagination and nature:

I glanced at a birch tree’s shiny bark and suddenly felt that, in place of arms, I possessed inclined branches covered with little wet leaves and, instead of legs, a thousand slender roots, twining into the earth, imbibing it. I wanted to transfuse

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

myself thus into all of nature, to experience what it was like to be an old boletus mushroom with its spongy yellow underside, or a dragonfly, or the solar sphere.<sup>38</sup>

The ethical constituent in the plot of this story is problematic and consistently downplayed, which may have been another reason why Nabokov did not publish this story in his lifetime.

As if to preempt a reading of “a thousand slender roots” as symbolic of the speaker’s rootedness in his native soil, this sense of oneness with the universe includes not just the solar sphere but, prophetically, “Niagara Falls thundering far beyond the ocean.”<sup>39</sup> The youthful narrator experiments also with projecting himself into the physical being of an older friend who may also be in love with the same lady: he “glided inside Pal Pahlych, made [him]self comfortable inside him, and felt from within, as it were, that growth on his wrinkly eyelid, the starched winglets of his collar, and the fly crawling across his bald spot.”<sup>40</sup> And yet, the narrator has little sympathy for the emotional life of Pal Pahlych; his youthful egotism leaves no place for compassions when it seems that Pal Pahlych may have been weeping. Here, in this early story, begins the theme of callousness that Nabokov will explore throughout his literary work, whether as an untrained mind’s inattention to the suffering of another in the vicinity of one’s own happiness or as a more mature characters’ deliberate neglect of such a suffering in the pursuit of their own gratifications.

The narrator of “Sounds” is disconnected also from the tread of history.<sup>41</sup> As the lady asks where Sarajevo is located, it is suggested that this is late summer of 1914 (the newspaper that she is reading probably carries the report of the assassination of the Grand Duke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo), and the lady’s husband may be coming home before getting a transfer because of the imminence of the war: the world, cherished as the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Ilya Ehrenburg’s remark on an older poet: “Pasternak was sensitive to nature, love, Goethe, Shakespeare, music, old German philosophy, Venetian painting, he felt himself and some people close to him, but he did not feel history; he heard sounds inaudible to others, he heard how heart was beating and how grass was growing, but he did not make out the tread of the age.” (Ehrenburg, *Liudi, gody, zhizn’*. Moscow: Tekst, 2005, I: 258; my translation).

protagonist's true lover, will soon change. The eloquently detached protagonist withholds support for the lady's Anna-Karenin fantasy of leaving her husband for him: as he rides away on his bicycle, the connection is severed. The young man whose happiness is celebrated in the story is not yet an exile, yet it is a young exile who both distances himself from the protagonist by a touch of dramatic irony and bestows on him what may be his own still invincible "natural exuberance."<sup>42</sup>

Another posthumously published 1923 story, "Gods," stages a thought experiment about the relationship of personal sorrow with the narrator's need for joy. The narrator is trying to pull his woman companion from the darkness that is creeping upon her because of the death of their baby son. He does so by calling her attention to the sights around them and to his own fabrications. Yet his flashes of historical scenes are strangely pervaded with violence: his imagination keeps returning to the death of the gladiators on the arena and the sadistic curiosity of the audience subverting the tragic.<sup>43</sup> "But he was so little, and so warm," says his companion.<sup>44</sup> The narrator cannot grieve:

Forgive me if I am incapable of weeping, of simple human weeping, but instead keep singing and running somewhere, clutching at whatever wings fly past, tall, disheveled, with a wave of suntan on my forehead. Forgive me. That's how it must be.<sup>45</sup>

The dark images that invade his thoughts show that he has to struggle against his own sorrow. "That's how it must be" is not here a sign of callousness but part of the attempts to support his companion in her grief.

To be invincible, the speaker's joy of life is in need of a justifying thought: "There is no death. The wind comes tumbling upon me from behind like a limp doll and

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<sup>42</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 174.

<sup>43</sup> By contrast, in the 1925 essay about boxing, the sport that Nabokov practiced in his youth alongside tennis, he disapproves of the intellectuals who dislike boxing the way some ancient Romans would dislike the gladiator fights. The objects of the dislike are different: a knockout in boxing is less cruel than it seems. Upon explaining that boxing too is an art, the 26-year-old Nabokov valorizes the aftereffects of the match on an appreciative audience — "a feeling of dauntless, flaring strength, vitality, courage, inspired by the play in boxing" (*Think, Write, Speak*, p. 37).

<sup>44</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

tickles my neck with its downy paw. There can be no death.” And yet it is the imminence of death that has made him cherish the life of the senses, even if their input is of the harsh cubist urban/industrial kind: “Today I understood the beauty of intersecting wires in the sky, and the hazy mosaic of factory chimneys, and this rusty tin with its inside-out, semi-detached, serrated lid.”<sup>46</sup> The story ends on a rhapsodic note:

And I want to rise up, throw my arms open for a vast embrace, address an ample luminous discourse to the invisible crowds. I would start like this:

“O rainbow-colored gods...”<sup>47</sup>

In 1932, the May issue of the journal *Sovremennye zapiski* (#49) carried Gaito Gazdanov’s novella “Schastie” (Happiness) and the first installment of Nabokov’s novel *Kamera Obscura* (the early version of *Laughter in the Dark*) — in both works wealthy businessmen eventually lose their sight. Gazdanov’s story, like Nabokov’s earlier fiction, raises the question whether happiness can be preserved in the face of major disasters. Gazdanov created fictional circumstances where the answer could be positive — and the story was hailed (perhaps as a platform for stinging V. Sirin) by Georgy Adamovich, the Dean of the émigré literary school that sounded the desolate “Paris Note.” Nabokov must have read the novella in the proofs — he considered it weak.<sup>48</sup> In 1956 Nabokov’s friend the novelist Mark Aldanov would publish his last novel *Suicide*, dealing with the passing of the prerevolutionary world and tracing, among other things, how a loving elderly couple, who had denied that there could ever be circumstances under which they would kill themselves, moves towards ultimately committing suicide together in Soviet Russia.

Such works may throw retrospective light on the reasons for Nabokov’s not having published “Gods”: the author may have been dissatisfied with the results of his *Gedankenexperiment*: the story ultimately fails to reconcile the narrator’s joy of life with

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> See Nabokov, *Letters to Vera*, p. 174 (letter of April 8, 1932). By contrast, in his 1935 short story “Torpid Smoke,” Gazdanov’s melancholy 1929 novel *An Evening at Claire’s* is mentioned among the books that had done the protagonist’s soul some good; on allusions in “Torpid Smoke” see Toker, “Nabokov’s ‘Torpid Smoke,’” *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 12 (1988): 239–48.

the personal sorrow against which he is struggling. Sorrow would be a tribute to the dead child. It is suggestive that already in this early text the narrator's thought about there being no death is framed as vindicating a continued joyful life-drive and perhaps as a basis for consolation.<sup>49</sup> The story was written shortly after Nabokov's father's assassination; the move to deny the finality of death<sup>50</sup> would become even more necessary three decades later, after the massive bereavements of the war.

### *On the Eve of a Change*

Sirin's youthful happiness is, among other things, the happiness of *potential* creative energy. Within a decade, the potential was realized. By the mid-1930s creative joy would be more closely connected with the actual kinetic energy of composition, the flow of the emergent work. This kind of flow, once known as "inspiration," is celebrated in two stories written in 1935, "Torpido Smoke" and "Recruiting." The theme of happiness in these two stories is, more forcefully and convincingly than in "Gods," a kind of happiness *in despite*.

The protagonist of "Torpido Smoke" is a young poet named Grisha, whose wish to devote himself to literature gets no encouragement from his environment yet who, unlike Cincinnatus in *Invitation to a Beheading*, cannot reject his environment. His father seems to be a middle-class *intelligent*, cultivated, well-meaning, somewhat unkempt, and pathetically human — a far cry from the obnoxious "parodies" around Cincinnatus. Yet he has prevailed on Grisha to gain a profession by studying political economy rather than "something quite different."<sup>51</sup> On the evening when the story is set the father is alone in the dining room; Grisha's sister is entertaining her boyfriend in the parlor; and he himself is lying supine in his room, "drugged by the oppressive, protracted feeling so familiar to

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<sup>49</sup> Maxim Shrayev views Nabokov's earliest short stories as his studies towards developing the theme of "the otherworld"; see Shrayev, *The World of Nabokov's Stories*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), pp. 23–28. In "'Bruised Fists': A Shift of Values in Nabokov's Fiction in the Late 1930s." *Krug: Journal of the Vladimir Nabokov Society of Japan* 12 (2020): 1–20, I discuss the change that took place after the late 1930s, from Nabokov's early emphasis on earthly happiness to his more mystical attitude to life and death.

<sup>50</sup> A similar denial underlies the thought-experiment indeterminacies of Nabokov's 1923 play "Death."

<sup>51</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 398.

him,”<sup>52</sup> a feeling that follows upon some “gentle mysterious shock”<sup>53</sup> and that will resolve itself in poetry. At the end of the story this languor finds release in a flow of verse.

The imagery, which serves to increase the density of the setting, forms a network of parallels and nuances that both point to the genuineness of the young man’s talent and suggest a reason for the “puerile” quality of his “perishable” production.<sup>54</sup> His languor set in when, while “trudging” on his father’s errand after an ordinary day at the university and library, Grisha noticed the “wet roof of some pub on the edge of a vacant lot.” The chimney smoke “hugged the roof, creeping low, heavy with damp, sated with it, sleepy, refusing to rise, refusing to detach itself from beloved decay.” This synaesthetic image — visual, tactile, organic and empathetic — produced a “thrill” that redeems the day for poetry. Grisha’s evening is then spent under the influence of the smoke’s torpor. Back in his room, he surrenders to a “languorous mist.”<sup>55</sup> The contours of his body seem to become indistinct, like those of the smoke: “the lane on the other side of the house might be his own arm, while the long skeletal cloud that stretch[es] across the whole sky with a chill of stars in the east might be his backbone” (397). The sense of the discreteness of the self is cancelled in such moments of near-aesthetic experience; not genuinely aesthetic in so far as the self is not transcended but rather extended to known reaches of the environment. This experience energized the imagination: the view of the room yields to images of “a sea horizon or a strip of distant land, . . . a remote mirage enchanting in its graphic transparency and isolation: a stretch of water . . . and a black promontory with the minuscule silhouette of an araucaria,”<sup>56</sup> all probably inspired by one of the favorite books on Grisha’s shelf — *Shatyor (Tent)*, the collection of Gumilyov’s “African” poems. Actuality intervenes to bring Grisha back to himself, but he evades his father’s tacit request for company — he yearns for return to that “languorous mist, promising — what?”<sup>57</sup> in contrast with the erotic heightening of his sister behind the closed door. As

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 396.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 399.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 400.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 396.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

Grisha is returning to his room in order to surrender to the spell, the narrative moves to the first person singular, as if the author were at this point merging with the protagonist. The sting of remorse for the detachment from the father, distanced by the time-shift that turns the image of the old man's hurt into a "future recollection," seems to be the last stimulus that transforms chaos into poetry:

With terrifying clarity, as if my soul were lit up by a noiseless explosion, I glimpsed a future recollection; it dawned on me that exactly as I recalled such images of the past as the way my dead mother had of making a weepy face and clutching her temples when mealtime squabbles became too loud, so one day I would have to recall, with merciless, irreparable sharpness, the hurt look of my father's shoulder as he leaned over that torn map, morose, wearing his warm indoor jacket powdered with ashes and dandruff; and all this mingled creatively with the recent vision of blue smoke clinging to dead leaves on a wet roof.<sup>58</sup>

The poem that now "begins to flow" will "wither" by the time the next one is printed, yet at the moment this does not matter. The story ends on a rhapsodic note:

at this moment I trust the ravishing promises of the still breathing, still revolving verse, my face is wet with tears, my heart is bursting with happiness, and I know that this happiness is the greatest thing existing on earth.<sup>59</sup>

It is on such exquisite moments rather than on the volume of completed production that the self-esteem of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev is based in Nabokov's *The Gift* — Nabokov was already working on *The Gift* when he wrote "Torpid Smoke." In the original version of "Torpid Smoke," the streets of Berlin contain "numerous portraits of the head of state ("главы государства"<sup>60</sup>), whereas in the 1973 translation, the reference

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 400.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Vesna v Fialte* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978), p. 77.



is more specific — “numerous portraits of President Hindenburg”<sup>61</sup>: the translation relegates the setting to years previous to 1935, closer to the times when *The Gift* is set: it is not from the sinister Hitler but from the President of the Weimar Republic (who died in August 1934) that Grisha can placidly detach himself. It may well be that the change in the time reference reflects the author’s hindsight: in 1935 Nabokov was still not conscious of the special place of Hitler’s rise to power in deepening the darkness of his world.

“I would like to understand,” says the narrator of Sirin’s 1935 story “Recruiting,” “whence comes this happiness, this swell of happiness, that immediately transforms one’s soul into something immense, transparent and precious.”<sup>62</sup> The wave of happiness is ascribed to an old man in a street garden in Berlin: it is represented as overwhelming Vasilii Ivanovich, a solitary old émigré, “tired, lonely, fat, ashamed, with all the nuances of old-fashioned modesty, of his mended linen, his decaying trousers, his whole unkempt, unloved, shabbily furnished corpulence,” who suddenly finds himself, on a summer afternoon, “filled with an almost indecent kind of joy of unknown origin, which more than once in the course of his long and rather arduous life, had surprised him by its sudden onset.”<sup>63</sup> There is life after exile and loss, there are moments of joy even if one is alone and with no hopes. Indeed, there soon follows a mellifluous description of the details of the street-garden scene, complete with flowers, bees ministering to linden trees, a wet red hose with a ghostly iridescence emanating from the “aura of its spray,” bushes and — as if to de-sentimentalize the picture — a chalet-style public toilet. “This little street garden,” comments the narrator, “these roses, this greenery — he had seen them a thousand times, in all their uncomplicated transformations, yet it all sparkled through and through with vitality, novelty, participation in one’s destiny, whenever he and I experienced such fits of happiness.”<sup>64</sup>

The first part of the story is presented as an omniscient narrative, including the old man’s biography and a brief account of the first part of his day: before coming to the

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 397.

<sup>62</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 402.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 403 In the English version of the story the echo of Wordsworth’s “Surprised by Joy” is particularly strong.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 404.

little street garden, he has attended a fellow refugee's funeral. The would-be omniscient narrative is punctuated by the third-person narrator's brief references to himself in the first person. By themselves, such uses of the first-person singular, not infrequent in classical novels, do not suffice to turn the narrator into a character in the storyworld. However, the reader may be puzzled by a detail of the scene in the cemetery: "this warm, joyous July wind" already rippling and curling the deceased Professor D.'s image in the old man's memory. The adjective "joyous" may seem inappropriate to the melancholy funeral scene, but on a repeated reading we see that the warm wind blows into this story-within-a-story from the frame-narrative, the secret sharing of experience in the street-garden where both the old man and the narrator are surprised by joy.

The first-person "I" in "whenever he and I experienced such fits of happiness" flips the narrative over: the mildly personalized extradiegetic narrator turns out to be a character-narrator, a flâneur entering the same Berlin street garden. He admits that he knows nothing about this old man, not even that he is a Russian, and that he has named him Vasilij Ivanovich "because that blend of name and patronymic is like an armchair, and he was broad and soft."<sup>65</sup> The narrator then proceeds to list the materials from his own experience out of which he had woven the old man's life (with Professor D.'s funeral only announced in the newspaper as a coming event).

The narrator cannot know whether his wave of joy is also the old man's or only his own but he *wants* the old man to experience it. Owing to the sympathetic account of Vasilij Ivanovich at the beginning of the story, one senses that this wish is a fellow feeling, that it is there for the old man's sake. It is, however, given two more dimensions. As if in a further move against sentimentalization, the narrator outlines a near-metaphysical motivation for his wish that this old man (whose invented name has shrunk to V. I.) should

share the terrible power of my bliss, redeeming its unlawfulness with his complicity, so that it would cease being a unique sensation, a most rare variety of madness, a monstrous sunbow spanning my whole inner being, and be accessible

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 404.

to two people at least, becoming their topic of conversation and thus acquiring rights to routine existence, of which my wild, savage, stifling happiness is otherwise deprived.<sup>66</sup>

The old man's removal of his hat seems to be a symbolic greeting of the narrator's thoughts, interpretable as confirming their shared experience which is thus cleared of idiosyncrasy and granted "rights to routine existence."

In his biography of Nabokov Brian Boyd notes that "Recruiting" was planned out during Nabokov's outings with his infant son to Grunewald,<sup>67</sup> when he must have experienced the waves of joy in response to the natural scene — experience known on similar occasions to most young parents, who also hope that their children share in it. Yet the narrator's "indecent" (in-despite) happiness is associated with his artistic endeavor. The narrator wishes to "infect" V. I. with his spontaneous joy of life, but, in addition, his own joy is a "blazing creative happiness that sends a chill over an artist's skin"<sup>68</sup> — a chill of aesthetic experience in the process of creation. The joy of life that the narrator wishes to universalize blends with the joy of success in an artistic search: he is a novelist who has now suddenly found in the old man the prototype of the character that he needs for his novel: "at all costs I had to have somebody like him for an episode in a novel with which I have been struggling for more than two years."<sup>69</sup> Eureka! He has discovered his copy, whose identity and history he spins out of his estimations of the typical but whose body language he must observe closely in order to describe it with a defamiliarizing reality effect: helped by the conductor to get off the tram, V. I. "accepted from above, with unhurried gratitude, his own arm, which the conductor had still been holding by the sleeve," and, on reaching a street-garden bench, "slowly, not yielding to the force of gravity until the last instant, finally sat down in surrender."<sup>70</sup> The prominence of a defamiliarizing view of the surrounding world is a distinctive feature of émigré literature;

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, p. 420.

<sup>68</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 405. On the meaning of the story's technique and its anticipation of the narrative principle of Nabokov's *Pnin*; see Toker, "Self-Conscious Paralepsis in Vladimir Nabokov's 'Recruiting' and *Pnin*," *Poetics Today* 7 (1986): 459–69.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 404.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 402

yet the force of the theme of joy is also largely associated with an exile's condition and is one of the most attractive ways of the creative processing of this condition.

### ***Confronting a Stigma***

Nabokov could not ignore that an influential strand in the Russian cultural tradition associated joy of life with silliness. This attitude is succinctly expressed in the diary of Maria Bashkirtseva, a Russian non-exile expatriate of the previous generation: “dans ce monde tout ce qui n'est pas triste est bête, et tout ce qui n'est pas bête est triste.”<sup>71</sup> Nabokov's early story “Details of a Sunset” (1924) can be read as, among other things, testing such stigmatization. It confers the experience of unhedged happiness on an ironically portrayed young German, “Mark Standfuss, a salesclerk, a demigod, fair-haired Mark, a lucky fellow with a high starched collar,”<sup>72</sup> and with adolescent “pink pimples on the chin.”<sup>73</sup> At the back of this “demigod's” neck there is a “little tag” of hair that has “escaped the barber's scissors”<sup>74</sup> — he believes that it is this boyish tag that has made his fiancée Klara fall in love with him. Mark serves customers with merry alacrity; he cannot resist invitations to the pub; he walks drunk with love and beer, and is accident prone. Yet his happiness too is made possible by detachment: he believes his fiancée Klara's assertion that she has forgotten her former love, “a handsome ruined foreigner”<sup>75</sup> who had rented a room in her house and absconded without settling the accounts. He ignores his mother's warning that only “a short time ago”<sup>76</sup> Klara was in love with this adventurer. Unlike most other protagonists of Nabokov's Berlin stories, Mark is represented as a German, an integral part of the country's population, rather than an émigré; this precludes reading his detachment as a facet of the émigré condition. His

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<sup>71</sup> “In this world, whatever is not sad is stupid, and whatever is not stupid is sad” (entry for May 7, 1876). *Journal de Marie Bashkirtseff* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1925), I: 154 The sentiment is echoed in the novel *Amor*, written in Gulag camps by Anastasia Tsvetayeva, Marina Tsvetayeva's sister.

<sup>72</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 79.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

dismissal of the signals that he is chosen by ricochet and that Klara does not really love him is a self-delusion, yet it gives him moments of great happiness.

The reader is distanced from Mark by dramatic irony: as Mark is making his way to Klara's house, we already know what he has not yet been told — that her beloved foreigner has returned and that she is breaking her engagement. And yet the narrative is sympathetic to Mark's joy and represents it as expanding his consciousness to see the beauty of his town at sunset:

The puddles, which still had not dried, surrounded by the bruise of dark damp (the live eyes of the asphalt), reflected the soft incandescence of the evening. The houses were as gray as ever; yet the roofs, the moldings above the upper floors, the gilt-edged lightning rods, the stone cupolas, the colonnettes which nobody notices during the day, for day people seldom look up were now bathed in rich ochre, the sunset's airy warmth, and thus they seemed unexpected and magical, those upper protrusions, balconies, cornices, pillars, contrasting sharply, because of their tawny brilliance, with the drab facades beneath.

Oh, how happy I am, Mark kept musing, how everything around celebrates my happiness.<sup>77</sup>

These images gain in romance and lusciousness immediately after Mark's traffic accident. Having noticed that he has missed his stop, he jumps off the moving tram and is hit by a bus from behind. At the moment of this mortal wound, Mark, like Cincinnatus in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, seems to dissociate from his body and walk away "as if nothing had happened."<sup>78</sup> Yet if in *Invitation to a Beheading* the climax is followed by a comically apocalyptic dismantling of Cincinnatus's town, in this early story the town is, on the contrary, endowed with sensual radiance, as if opiates got released in a wounded man's body:

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 82

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

The street was wide and gay. The colors of the sunset had invaded half of the sky. Upper stories and roofs were bathed in glorious light. Up there, Mark could discern translucent porticoes, friezes and frescoes, trellises covered with orange roses, winged statues that lifted skyward golden, unbearably blazing lyres. In bright undulations, ethereally, festively, these architectonic enchantments were receding into the heavenly distance, and Mark could not understand how he had never noticed before those galleries, those temples suspended on high.<sup>79</sup>

This enchantment does not crash but recedes “into the heavenly distance” as the pain returns. As Julian Connolly notes, “the story provides an early glimpse into a dynamic that will assume major significance later in Nabokov’s career — the potential bifurcation within a character into two distinct components, an internal center of creative consciousness and an external form that can be manipulated and influenced by the outside world.”<sup>80</sup>

In his 1976 comments Nabokov recorded having been displeased with the “odious” title “Katastrofa” (A catastrophe) “inflicted upon this story”<sup>81</sup> in 1924 when it was published in the Riga émigré daily *Segondnia*. For the McGraw-Hill edition of his selected stories he chose the title “Details of a Sunset,” emphasizing not the pain but the beauty. He used this programmatic phrase as the title of the whole collection. The story, indeed, is about happiness — an unrestrained, self-defeatingly unreserved, somewhat foolish happiness<sup>82</sup> — rather than about disaster. The fatal accident actually spares Mark the pain of the broken heart, the crash of his life’s hopes. If happiness is silly, then very well, let that silliness be treasured! This kind of stance was quite courageous against the background of the “Paris note” of émigré literature, and may be part of the reason why Nabokov’s early work struck his Russian audience as somewhat foreign.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>80</sup> Connolly, *Nabokov’s Early Fiction: Patterns of Self and Other* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 16.

<sup>81</sup> Nabokov, *Collected Stories*, p. 646.

<sup>82</sup> The motif of silliness is both enhanced and distanced in the English version of the story. The phantom Mark who is walking away from the accident seems to be thinking “That was stupid. Almost got run over by a bus” (*Collected Stories*, p. 83). “That was stupid” renders the reproachful “Тоже ...” in the original (Nabokov, *Vozvrashchenie Chorba*, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1976, p. 153).

By the time Nabokov would set out to write *Bend Sinister*, however, the valorization of happiness “in despite” would be a matter of the past. The experience of the late 1930s and the knowledge of what happened during World War II placed the residual yearning for happiness in Nabokov’s texts on different grounds, with an enhanced touch of mysticism replacing the exuberance of youth and love as well as the exile’s joy of weightlessness in the social world.

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