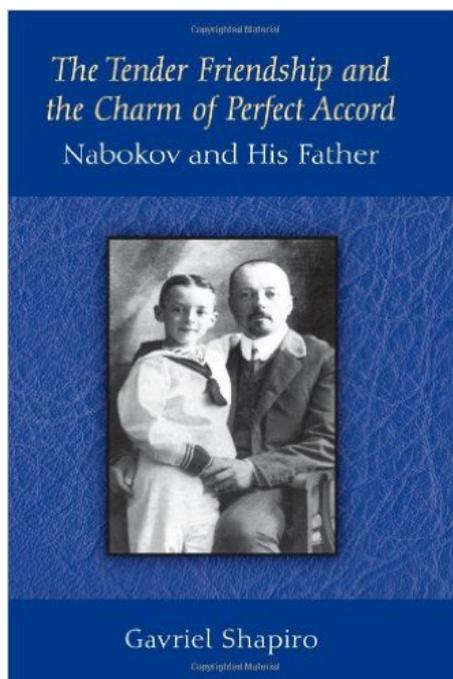


***The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord: Nabokov and His Father*, by Gavriel Shapiro.** Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014. ISBN 9780472119189. Illustrations. Appendices. Bibliography. Index. 306 pp.



The book's title allows for a focus on several aspects of the Nabokovs' father-son relationship. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov primarily discusses how very affectionate their bond was. He also presents a short outline of his father's career and lists his many interests: "criminological, legislative, political, editorial, philanthropic" (186). It is Gavriel Shapiro's object "to examine the worldview, literary legacy, and multitudinous pursuits of Vladimir Nabokov as impacted by his father" (5). To this end, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov's persuasions in juridical and political matters, his literary tastes, his preferences for the fine arts and music, as well as his fondness for chess and outdoor sports, are compared with those of his son's. The author has the intention to demonstrate that V. D. Nabokov's example exerted "the most fundamental influence" on his son's art (6).

Because of the exceptionally rich allusiveness of Nabokov's prose, with references to a wide variety of cultural, natural and historical phenomena, it is most illuminating to learn more about their origin. As numerous interests and opinions of the father coincide with those of the writer, and because of the extensive range of V. D. Nabokov's culture and erudition, one is tempted to think that with such a father one needs only a minor talent to become a major writer.

One of the first subjects Shapiro discusses, shows how productive his approach is. In 1908, V. D. Nabokov was confined at the Kresty prison for three months following the malfeasance of signing the Vyborg Manifesto; some of his experiences as described in *Prison Pastimes* correspond with events related in his son's novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*.

In the chapter called "Literature," a multitude of writers and poets are discussed. Quoting Nabokov's words: "I am also aware that my father was responsible for my appreciating very early in life the thrill of a great poem", Shapiro argues that this applies, too, for the writer's "many predilections, especially for Shakespeare, Dickens, Wells and Flaubert, as well as Pushkin, Tiutchev, Fet and Blok" (102).

While searching for correspondences, one might be disinclined to welcome discordances. Shapiro's claim that "[i]t is no exaggeration to say that Nabokov's political views were shaped by those of his father, which in turn, by and large, are reflected in the original Kadet Party platform," and Shapiro's disagreement with Leona Toker's opinion that Nabokov's "political views were not identifiable with those of any party", are difficult to align with Nabokov's indomitable aversion to politics that he has expressed so frequently (58-59). He even "never voted" (Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1990: 5). V. D. Nabokov pursued his altruistic political goals so passionately that he had to flee his country twice – in 1906 and 1917 – to avoid being killed by his adversaries, right- and left-winged. (For a charming picture of V. D. Nabokov's excitement when elected for the Duma, see note 98, page 82).

After discussing "Painting, Theatre and Music," the final chapter is devoted to "Lepidoptera, Chess and Sports." Despite the concurrences of partialities of father and son, it seems that the nurture-nature question cannot be forgotten altogether. Nabokov's youngest brother, Kirill, was only ten years of age when their father was assassinated, but for him literature was also "the great reality in life" (*Speak, Memory*, 256).

The subject of Shapiro's book is of so much importance that it has been addressed earlier. Of course, he refers to Brian Boyd's biography who "established the extent and significance" of V. D. Nabokov's influence on his eldest son (4). He also mentions Dana Dragunoiu's recent *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* in which many traces of V. D. Nabokov's liberalism in the philosophical and idealistic aspects of his son's fiction are studied, but refers to it only once, and rather scantily. Shapiro criticizes Dragunoiu for quoting a remark by Raymond Pearson about V. D. Nabokov's "covert anti-Semitism" (86). Shapiro argues convincingly that Pearson is mistaken, but does not reflect on some of V. D. Nabokov's less fortunate expressions that Dragunoiu quotes and for which Pearson's phrase

serves merely as a preamble. It seems a polemic without an issue: Dragunoiu concludes her discussion of “V. D. Nabokov and Culture” (178-185) by stating that he is “one of Russia’s most beloved and revered political figures” (184; for a proof of this, see Mikhail Efimov’s review, in the present volume, of the 2014 V. D. Nabokov conference proceedings). And for everyone who has read V. D. Nabokov’s “The Kishinev Bloodbath” (reproduced in Shapiro’s book as Appendix 1), a fierce, uncompromising and courageous *J’accuse* of unparalleled clarity, it will be clear that any suggestion of anti-Semitism on V. D. Nabokov’s part is futile.

V. D. Nabokov’s infelicitous remarks, however insignificant, seem to indicate a degree of inconsequentiality that can be observed in other respects, too. He regarded capital punishment as a grave error, initiated a bill for its abolition in the Duma and published several papers on the subject. Nonetheless, he supported “the Kerensky government, which attempted to reinstate the death penalty in the armed forces poisoned by revolutionary agitation” (30). He “argued that homosexual acts between consenting adults ought to be decriminalized”, but also wrote that “sodomy” inspires “profound disgust”, using harsher words for his judgment than the context calls for (Dragunoiu 175-76). In 1910 he wrote a pamphlet about the absurdity of duelling, but challenged Mikhail Suvorin a year after its publication (see *Speak, Memory*, 188-193). When V. D. Nabokov was deprived of his court title due to his censure of the tragedy of Bloody Sunday (1903), he “coolly advertised in the papers his court uniform for sale” – but in March 1917 “petitioned to be reinstated in the Assembly of Noblemen in St. Petersburg Province” (Boyd 57; 127). Having been a leader of the Kadet party that aimed at a constitution opposed to despotism, it comes as a surprise to read that V. D. Nabokov quotes from “The Hero as King” by Thomas Carlyle, notorious for his illiberalism, who in the same article rejects “constitution-building” as inferior to some Cromwell or Napoleon as the “necessary finish of sansculottism” (Shapiro 63; *Sartor Resartus & On Heroes*, London: J.M. Dent, 1910, 423). Given V. D. Nabokov’s thoughtfulness and intelligence, these seeming contradictions can undoubtedly be resolved if we learn enough of his mind and the extreme turbulent times he had to cope with.

In the bibliography, no less than fifty-six publications by V. D. Nabokov are listed, and citations from the Russian are conveniently presented in both English translation and Cyrillic. Shapiro’s book is exemplary in other respects as well. It has four appendices, two papers by V. D. Nabokov and two by his son. The fourth is entitled “About Opera”, in which Nabokov argues that, because human beings are no birds (he wittily begins his essay “ab ovo”), an opera is only admissible when the “environment” requires the human voice to sing and not to speak (265-66). The book has some delightful details; there is a nice cameo by

Bernard Pares of V. D. Nabokov's diplomacy and an amazing recollection by Kornei Chukovsky of V. D. Nabokov's expert knowledge of Dickens, as he could enumerate the names of three hundred of this author's characters (48; 103).

Shapiro's book contributes considerably to the knowledge available to English readers about the eminence of V. D. Nabokov, especially regarding his honourable opinions and conduct, and his impressive erudition, both of which were of great importance for V. V. Nabokov during his formative years.

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