

**Andrei Babikov**

## ART'S PRECIOUS BRITTLENESS

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In February 1998, at the Moscow presentation of Adrian Lyne's adaptation of *Lolita*, I asked Dmitri Nabokov an indelicate question: what will happen to *The Original of Laura*? Dmitri's face darkened slightly. He answered that he could not resolve to destroy the manuscript according to his father's will and that he would probably confine himself to publishing several fragments of his own translation into Italian.

The dying Vladimir Nabokov left his dearest ones – wife and son – a very difficult ethical task with *contradictio in adjecto*: to take an action because of love – to destroy the manuscript of an unfinished novel – but at the same time their love of his compositions would not let them do it. It is not surprising that longstanding thoughts and wavering stood before making the decision to publish.

Ten more years passed before I found out the continuation of this story.

The manuscript of *Laura* still had not been destroyed. The number of researchers who read it little by little started to grow and, despite all of them keeping its content secret, some things came to the surface, together with fantastic conjectures of those who had not held the cards in their hands. I had just finished working on a complete set of Nabokov's dramatic works for the St. Petersburg publishing house *Azbooka*, and could

not even presume that soon I'd find myself among these few researchers and publishers who would be the first to read this manuscript.

Several years earlier, in 2003, Dmitri Nabokov allowed me to take a look at his father's archival materials kept in the USA. Then, in a cool hall of the Berg collection in the Public Library in New York, from Nabokov's notebooks I found out the history of *Laura's* creation and conjectured the last and the most mysterious chapter of his biography (a lot of interesting facts I learned long before, from Brian Boyd's *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*).

In the 1970s, Nabokov wrote brief entries in his scribbling diaries of medium and small formats, both in English and Russian which, in their laconic manner, reminded me of the Russian poet and Nabokov's mentor, Vladislav Khodasevich's *Kammer-Fourier Journal*. One part of them touched upon everyday life in the Montreux-Palace Hotel, while the others described business meetings, expenses, trips, butterflies, relatives, works in progress, dreams, state of health and the rest. All his life, Nabokov suffered from insomnia, so many notes referred to this ailment: "Best night in my life" (September 12, 1975), "First time since beginning of year slept without pills" (March 29, 1976). "I weigh 80 kilos!" he wrote (October 31, 1975) in Russian. The note (dated May 3, 1974) "E.→Ленинградъ" meant that his sister Elena went to Leningrad. "Fayard's fellows" meant that he had a meeting with the representatives of the Paris publishing house *Fayard*, which released a French translation of *Ada*. "Верочка приезжает (Véra is coming). Very fine!" The other part of his notes referred to his artistic ideas, to the progress of the book he was working on at that time ("*Lolita, a Screenplay*, comes out" – April 10, 1974; "600 cards of *LATH* ready" – February 21, 1974), there were also several poems in English and Russian.

One of the poems (June 1974) revealed his thoughts concerning death. I have managed to decipher these lines:

«Ежели хватит смелости и таланта [.]

Как? Бросить все: работу, негу,  
Искусства милую скудель?  
(По розовеющему снегу

Так Пушкин ехал на дуэль.)  
И этот дивный мир покинуть?  
Нет, череп, ты мне не гадай,  
Какую карту надо вынуть,  
Чтобы попасть в твой [страшный?] рай.

(The crossed out version of the last line was «кромешный рай» – pandemonium paradise, the inversion of the Russian phrase «ад кромешный» [“an ultimate hell,” i.e. outside God’s presence]). Gennady Barabtarlo offers two versions of this draft in English translation – literal and poetic – that is, one that retains the meter and the masculine/feminine ending alteration (with no attempt to rhyme):

If one can muster enough daring and talent.

[1] What! To leave behind everything: work, mollescence,  
My dear, fragile vessel of art?  
(Thus Pushkin was riding to his duel  
Along the roads covered with snow turning pink).  
And to abandon this wondrous world?  
No, skull, do not tell me  
Which card I should draw  
So as to get to your [horrifying?] paradise.

[2] What! To abandon work and pleasure,  
Beloved earthenware of art?  
(Thus Pushkin rode to his rencontre  
Past snowdrifts touched by sunset pink).  
To leave behind this world, its wonders?  
No, fortune-telling skull, desist,  
Don’t point the card that I should draw out  
To make your [dreaded?] paradise.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Editor wishes to thank Prof. Barabtarlo for his translation of the poem specially for this article.

The first version of this poem was referred to in March 1971, and later Nabokov returned to it several times on the pages of his diaries. In October 1975, he translated the first quatrain into English and never touched it again:

Leave everything – work, pleasure,  
Art's precious brittleness?  
Over the snow that flushes pink, thus  
Pushkin was driving to the duel.

This poem, like the novel he started to work on at the end of 1975, was left unfinished.

Nabokov first writes about the progress of work on his yet untitled book in the diary (in the cheapest kind of them all, the oilcloth green one) on January 1, 1976: “Writing since 10. XII. 75 at least three cards of new novel.” A month later (on February 2), trying to calculate the speed of the novel's progress in order to define his plans with the publishing houses concerning the release of the new book, he remarks:

*“New Novel [.] More or less completed & copied 54 cards since 10. XII. 75 (...) 50 days. Not too much.”*

Nabokov mentioned neither the plot nor the heroes of the novel, but it was clear that he referred to *Laura*, the novel he started to contemplate at the time of working on *LATH*, which he finished in April 1974. *Laura's* evocation proceeded too slowly for his impetuous pen, with the average speed of one (clean copy) card per day. It happened this way because a lot of things had to be rewritten and the topic itself (the neurologist Wild's notes) needed deep academic research and copying (for instance from the old *Human Physiology* by John Thornton and William A. M. Smart, 1894, or from books on oriental studies, and even from newspapers, as we can see on card 64).

However, soon the writing slowed even more due to the decline in the author's health. Notes in the diary become even rarer and more laconic. If, from December 1975 through February 1976, he filled only 54 cards (which precisely matches the length of the

snippety text of the first 4 chapters), for the remaining 16 months of his life, Nabokov had time to finish (as that many of them were incomplete) only about another 80 cards. Nevertheless, in January 1976, it seemed to him and his wife that the work on the new novel was taking all his time and was steaming ahead. In a letter to the Ardis publisher, Carl Proffer, dated January 21, Mrs. Nabokov writes that her husband “will do it [draft the volume of his stories], but at this moment he is completely absorbed in his new novel, which is going full swing. Thus the short stories will have to wait until he can interrupt his present work, maybe a month or so.”<sup>2</sup> Most likely this meant not finishing the novel in just a month’s time, but the fact that Nabokov hoped to finish its draft in a month or so (as a comparison: the draft of *Invitation to a Beheading* was written in only two weeks in the mid-1930s); until then he did not want to concentrate on other projects. What is more, it meant that by the beginning of 1976, the novel had been thought over by him in detail; otherwise the Nabokovs, who were meticulous in those sorts of questions, could not have promised Proffer such an early reply regarding the compilation of the vast collection of his short stories. Apparently it was in the spring of 1976 when the work on the book was abruptly delayed, if not completely halted. Nabokov still had time (in the middle of February) to give the novel its final and brilliant title which, like his previous book, could be read in two different ways (*LATH* and *TOOL*). Here the curtain fell and the new act started for me after a long interval, in the spring of 2009, one of the established Nabokov scholars and translators suddenly informed me that *Laura* would be published after all, and suggested my editing its Russian publication.

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I present the above-written account not only for “mnemonic comfort,” as the hero of this tragic story would say (though it is true that a conversation concerning *Laura* for each Nabokov scholar involuntarily becomes some sort of summary), but to indicate how little I had seen of Nabokov’s novel by the time I was starting to prepare my work on this book – I knew nothing about its length, or about textual or stylistic peculiarities. What is more, I knew nothing about its contents. I received a facsimile of the first part of the

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<sup>2</sup> I am obliged to Stanislav Shvabrin who sent me the ectype of this letter.

cards, on which the first chapters of the novel were written, via mail from the USA only in the middle of May 2009 (the book was issued in Russia six months later).

In the meantime, answering my question on the method of *Laura's* translation (if it is possible to speak of such a thing when the text time and again dangles and breaks off in mid-sentence – refer to cards 45, 47, 61, 62, 65, 66 and especially 96 and 106), Gennady Barabtarlo sent me his translation of the first chapter of the novel with the following dispassionate elucidation: “My method, as you’ll see, is some sort of evolution of origins which are stated in the foreword to *Knight* [Barabtarlo’s new translation of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* published by *Azbooka* in May 2008] and are used in it. The main thing here is naturalness of Russian literature language utmost available for me, together with the nearest possible (somewhere precise, somewhere close, somewhere periphrastic) conveyance of the original’s meaning.”

The work on the book proceeded in the following manner: at first Barabtarlo would send me from Missouri and Finland bits of the translation as it was moving along, and I (traveling between Moscow, Dalmatia, Zurich, and Lugano), accomplishing meanwhile my own translation of Nabokov’s *Lolita: A Screenplay*), compared them with the English typescript and the original text on the cards. After that, I sent them back with my comments and suggestions which, as often as not, caused long-lasting discussions (the title, the composition, anagram reproduction, card arrangement, spelling of proper nouns, annotating, etc.). The third tier in this international exchange was Petersburg, where *Azbooka* headquarters are based, which rather phlegmatically awaited our rapid delivery of the completed translation “in view of the smallness of the original itself.”

A person – let him be well-educated, talented and thoughtful – opposed to Nabokov’s scholarship will never realize what kind of specific demands Nabokov has for the reader and all the more for the translator of his books. And *Laura* in this regard, with its flash-like narration and sudden interruption of the plot ties, was a still more difficult trial. The high concentration of various kinds of combinatory forms in these fragments requires advanced delicacy and skill by the translator. Apart from Nabokov’s usual alliterations (“a dour old don,” “Carlton Courts in Cannes,” “clap their claws like crabs”), the text was full of anagrams (“details” – delta, tail, slit;), paronyms (Laura – Flora – Cora – Aurora), neologisms (“Glandscape,” “librarious,” “marbrosa”), puns

(“Landskaya” – land+sky; Espenshade – Espen (*germ.* aspen)+shade; Rawitch – Raw+Itch, Rah+Witch), and other examples of stylistic finesse proving the tireless maestro’s inventiveness.

When the first full version of the translation was completed, Barbatarlo proceeded to polishing it (there were six editions and three proofs) and, on occasion, we supplied the novel with notes in order not to have the reader confront questions like: which ballets are meant by the elegant jingle “Narcisse et Narcette” (card 25); how is “Green Chapel of St Esmeralda” (card 121) related to the title of the novels by Vadim Vadimovich from *LATH* and to the butterfly from one poem (1953) by Vladimir Vladimirovich; or what exactly does Plato mean with the term *sophrosyne* and how is this notion connected with Philip Wild’s self-destructive meditations? Furthermore, these explanations set *Laura*’s Russian edition apart from the English one, which is limited by reproduction of the novel’s typescript and index cards in the way and order they were found after the author’s death. In the Russian edition, an insignificant editorial alteration was made by us, on the grounds that, aside from documentary value, the *Laura* manuscript nevertheless represents bits of fiction: incomplete chapters with different degrees of polishing. Leaving evident slips of the pen *in translation* appeared to us absurd. The novel’s English typescript reproduces obviously unintentional iteration of the participle in the following sentence: “narrow nates of an ambiguous irresistible charm (nature’s beastliest bluff, said Paul de G *watching* a dour old don *watching* boys bathing)” (cards 10-11). In the Russian edition, avoiding additional ambiguity, we took the liberty of taking away the first participle, mentioning the removal in the annotation. The other distinction of the Russian edition is that the notes do not alternate with the novel’s text, unlike in its English edition, but are provided in the appendix. However, the full English text, together with the original cards, is given in *Laura*’s Russian deluxe edition. Yet the main distinction of the Russian edition is the fact that cards 110-111 and the cards marked letter Z (112-114) are placed at the very end of the book, as they presumably appear to be the final cards of the novel. This decision is explained in the translator’s afterword, whose erudition and thorough knowledge of Nabokov allows him to insert this unfinished novel within the system of other Nabokov works and to explain to the reader the possible unraveling of the plot and its probable ending.

Publication of *The Original of Laura* finally gives answers to various questions: what new stylistic devices Nabokov intended to test after *LATH*; what the range of his reading and interests in the closing stages of his life were like; how *TOOL* was connected with his other books in the way of renewal and progress of his fancied themes and motifs, and so on. It is also true that it leaves quite a few questions open which are either hard or impossible to answer.

At the same time, the number of published fragments suffices to make different conjectures or even conclusions on their manner and matter. Thus, for instance, it is evident that the last novel should have embodied themes and plots of Nabokov's previous books and should have turned out to be, after *LATH*, a new revision of his creative heritage. *Laura* was supposed to sum up. There are some observations which illustrate this.

*Laura* begins with a dialogue, as only one of Nabokov's novels does – *Mary*, his very first one, written 50 years before. “The art of thinking away my body, my being, mind itself” (card 122), accidentally revealed to Philip Wild, recalls Falter, the hero of Nabokov's “Ultima Thule” from the unfinished novel who by accident found out the “riddle of the universe” and apparently destroyed himself by force of will: “he wrote, in a clean hand, that he would die on Tuesday, and that in parting he ventured to inform me that – here followed two lines which had been painstakingly and, it seemed, ironically blacked out.”<sup>3</sup> Laura-Flora's duality (*Flaura* as she is called on card 56) in a strange way harkens back to characters of an again incomplete story (Nabokov intended to write three parts but finished and published only the first one), *Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster* (1952), about Siamese twins *Lloyd* and *Floyd*.

Broad cultural associations which recall Flora and Laura are reflected in the novel's plot itself. Why does the action start in spring (“of the spring night framed in the open French window”)? It is not only because the heroine has a physical likeness to the “fifth girl from left to right, the flower-decked blonde with the straight nose and serious

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<sup>3</sup> *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Vintage, 1995, p. 522.

gray eyes, in Botticelli's *Primavera*, an allegory of Spring, my love, my allegory," as Vadim Vadimovich says of his beloved (*LATH*, part 2, chapter 7), but also because Petrarch met his Laure de Noves in April. As an aside, this is another parallel to Nabokov's debut in prose, *Mary* (1925), which also starts in spring. The reference to Botticelli raises a number of motifs connected with art and artists (Lev Linde, Rawitch) in the novel, and Flora, like Petrarch's Laure, inspires her lover to compose the novel *My Laura*, which appears to be "a maddening masterpiece." In some specified sense Flora is as elusive and inspiring as Petrarch's Laure: "Everything about her is bound to remain blurry, even her name, which seems to have been made expressly to have another one modeled upon it by a fantastically lucky artist" (card 43). Like dolly girl Anna Blagovo (her surname means "for a good cause," Russian "во благо") from Nabokov's previous novel, who resembled Flora from Botticelli's painting, to Vadim Vadimovich, and like Lolita and Ada, and Nina from "Spring in Fialta," Flora Wild virtually turns out to be an allegory of art, even the most brittle flesh of art: "Her exquisite bone structure immediately slipped into a novel – became in fact the structure of that novel, besides supporting a number of poems" (card 8). And it is most likely that the novel *My Laura* like these several poems should have become a component part of *TOOL* the same way as the book about Chernyshevski merged into *The Gift* and Humbert's diary and his poems weave into *Lolita*.

Another observation makes us muse over the inconceivable symmetry of Nabokov's art, which gives a hint of the existence of a design even more extensive and harmonic than the one which was limited by his physical ability and the time given to him. *Laura's* opening ("Her husband, she answered, was a writer...") is surprisingly close to the opening of another unfinished Nabokov work – the second volume of *The Gift* that he was working on in Paris in 1939. That year was especially fruitful in his life: *The Enchanter*, "Solus Rex," and "Ultima Thule," all of which were written at that time, served him as food for thought for several of his future books (*Bend Sinister*, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*). The draft of *The Gift* sequel begins: "Oh, no, she answered. Books, novels" (in Russian). As in *Laura*, we don't know the question which the heroine answers. Responding to her relative, Nazi and *raisonneur* Kostritsky, Zina says that her husband Fyodor writes fiction (not political articles for the newspapers as he presumably

suspects), while Flora, to the contrary (but in a similar way), says that *her husband* Philip Wild is writing a mysterious “testament”, but “not a work of fiction.”

According to the legend, after Dante’s death his sons for a long time could not find the last part of the *Paradiso* until Dante appeared in his son Jacopo’s dream and said where the manuscript was hidden. The last book that Nabokov read in the hospital was *Divine Comedy*, and here one more symmetry begins to take shape, in the art of which Alighieri had been a connoisseur.

Nabokov liked to compare books with a puzzle in which a general picture takes shape from the gradual juxtaposition of random bits. All that is left for us of *Laura* is maybe a quarter of the whole novel, or even less. Many of these cards are arranged in random order and, not knowing the whole, it will never be possible to say what one or another episode refers to, what dialogue this particular phrase continues. The destiny of the last Nabokov novel is similar to the destiny of his first big opus, the poetic *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, only with the mirroring anti-equality that this *Tragedy* was completely finished (in 1924 in Prague), but was not published during his lifetime, and for the long years of emigration it was partly lost. *Laura*, on the contrary, was never completed and was published in its fragmental condition only after Nabokov’s death. That *The Original of Laura* yet exists in its ideal shape, in some ideal world, like the last line of the *Pale Fire* poem, invulnerable for the critics, brittle like immortelles, composed of the same parts that, thirty-five years ago, were brought together in a completed painting in the master’s mind, remains the only, albeit ephemeral, consolation to readers.

