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Pour citer cet article

Parker Stephen Jan, « Nabokov's Montreux Books: Part II », *Cycnos*, vol. 10.1 (*Nabokov : Autobiography, Biography and Fiction*), 1993, mis en ligne en juin 2008.
<http://epi-revel.univ-cotedazur.fr/publication/item/478>

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Cycnos, études anglophones

revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

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EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Nabokov's Montreux Books: Part II

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In this abbreviated version of my paper, I am foregoing the description of the disposition of the Nabokovs' books in their Montreux Palace residence, which completed my earlier published discussion of Nabokov's acquisition and use of books and the general description of the Nabokov library.¹ I will note only that the library is at present dispersed, with the most important volumes now housed in the Nabokov Archive at the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library.

Nabokov obtained and used books for various purposes: scientific work, teaching, scholarly work, translations, research and reference relevant to the composition of his fictions, and books for his own reading enjoyment. The following are several of the most notable books in the collection.

PUSHKIN:

Nabokov's Pushkin was *Sochineniia Aleksandra Pushkina. Iubileinoe izdanie Pushkinskago komitete. 1837-1937. Redaktor M.L. Gofman, printed in Germany.* It is a one-volume collected works, boxed, in poor condition, heavily annotated by Nabokov throughout. It is the edition which he used for all his Pushkin work — and it is the one book of her husband's, other than his own works, that his wife kept at her bedside following his death.

GOGOL:

Nabokov's Gogol was *Sochineniia N.V. Gogolia. Polnoe sobranie v odnom tome. Vtoroe izdanie. Redaktor F. Pavlenkova. St. Petersburg, 1908, 1,704 pages.* This one volume edition of Gogol's collected works is in a large 8 x 11" format, copiously illustrated. The cover has Gogol's head in relief with — appropriately enough — much of his nose rubbed off. The volume is in poor condition with pages 1001-1016 missing. It shows heavy usage and heavy notation, particularly the texts which Nabokov taught — "The Overcoat," "The Inspector General," and *Dead Souls*. The edition was originally his father's and served as the source for all of Vladimir Nabokov's work on Gogol. It was discovered in the Montreux Palace attic, hidden away in a pile of books destined to be discarded.

LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION TEXTS:

Brian Boyd notes that for his beginning Russian classes at Wellesley, Nabokov used Burkett's *A Modern Russian Course*.² Yet, on a page of Guerney's anthology of Russian literature, Nabokov writes: "For my language courses I have used a combination of the grammars of Burkett, Semianov [sic], Bondar, and my own unpublished grammar." These volumes are (1) G.A. Birkett. *A Modern Russian Course*, second edition, 1942; (2) D. Bondar. *Bondar's Simplified Russian Method. Conversational and Commercial*, 6th edition, undated; (3) Anna Semeonoff. *A New Russian Grammar*, 1942. As for Nabokov's reference to "my own unpublished grammar," when I asked about that, Mrs. Nabokov replied that he of course never wrote one, that it was "all in his head."

Each of these textbooks is copiously notated. Which ones Nabokov actually had the students purchase, other than Burkett's, has not been established, but judging from the notations, Nabokov himself used all the texts. Each carries, for example, the names of students and their grades on various exams listed in the margins. From the notations it can be deduced that Nabokov's pedagogical approach to Russian language instruction was traditional for that time, with an emphasis on grammar and translation. In the margins one finds numerous

¹ Stephen Jan Parker, "Nabokov in the Margins: The Montreux Books," *Journal of Modern Literature*, XIV:1 (Summer 1987), 5-16.

² Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1991, p. 60.

translation exercises, many declension and conjugation drills, lists of gerunds and participles, the use of stick feet and bicycle wheels to present verbs of motion, and a rudimentary clockface to present the telling of time. One of the exams written in the margins is a list of 20 English sentences to be translated into Russian (“She cannot speak English,” “Goodbye, dear citizen.” “You are answering badly.”) Another has: “Describe a room in Russian (no more than fifty words). Give examples of perfect and imperfective aspects of verbs meaning to speak and to write. Decline ‘my old father.’” The special Nabokov touch is apparent in the creative alphabet pronunciation equivalents, and in marginal remarks such as this description of pallatalization: “the inner edge of the consonant meets at the contact with a squashed vowel and merges with it.”

Nabokov’s text for second year Russian was George Z. Patrick’s *Intermediate Russian Reader*, 1945, which is a collection of short literary texts which presumably were read and translated by the students.

LITERATURE LECTURES TEXTS:

Fredson Bowers has now given the world his concept of Nabokov’s literature lectures — under the title, *Nabokovs’ Lectures on Literature* — based largely on Bowers’ own restructuring of Nabokov’s class notes (with Bowers’ own prose bridges masquerading as Nabokov’s) and a rudimentary perusal of some of Nabokov’s class texts. Actually, Bowers was unaware of the complete content of Nabokov’s courses; did not have all the course notes; did not have all the texts; and what texts he did have were examined only cursorily. There remains a wealth of additional information to be gleaned from Nabokov’s marked texts. The examples which follow are illustrative.

Some of the teaching texts have been lost. Examining those which are in the collection, it is evident from the nature and extent of notation, that the amount of preparation reserved for a text was in large part proportional to the degree to which Nabokov was at home with the language of the original. Russian works were the least marked, the one German work the most marked.

I. PROUST

Swann’s Way. tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff. New York: Modern Library, 1928. [the French text from which Nabokov worked has been lost].

The volume serves as a prime example of Nabokov’s encounter with a text, demonstrating the exceptional amount of meticulous work he engaged in preparation for his lectures. On the first page, he makes a list: “Note” — he writes — “1. the circumstances that permit the narrator to be present at this or that conversation or incident. 2. the development of the jealousy and possession and tenderness / cruelty theme. 3. metaphors, meandering similes curiously resembling those of Gogol. 4. errors of judgment, false rumors in the world of fashion corrected later (the truth being as it were written to follow them up and then the *truth, istinu* through all prisms and metamorphosis, and beyond them). 5. curious lines with the 18th century style - with the kind of aphoristic note that J. Austen and Pushkin borrowed indirectly from French novels. 6. The methods of recollection. 7. The various senses that are characters in the book: taste, smell, vision, hearing.”

The text itself is heavily marked on nearly every page in gray and red lead, blue and black ink. Notations are in regard to language and textual details. Moncrieff’s translation is corrected throughout, with Nabokov frequently supplying the French original in the margins. He makes notations to check the original French and then writes it in, enters comments on exceptional stylistic passages, gives expressions of admiration for Proust’s phrasing. As to detail, Nabokov enters marginal notes to check on the names of characters and their real-life equivalents; to check definitions for terms with which he is not familiar (later marking them in the margin in another color). Marginal notes unravel genealogy and chronology; explain

references, literary and other; identify quotations; and supply precise identification of people, places, flora and fauna.

What we have, in effect, is something of an annotated volume, as well as a trip through Nabokov's sensibility. This teaching text presents a record of Nabokov's direct encounter with Proust's work, the appreciation of one artist for the art of another.

II. KAFKA

In the *Lectures on European Literature*, Bowers offers his reconstitution of Nabokov's presentation of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Following his usual practice, Bowers presents photocopies of only one page from Nabokov's class text and some diagrams and text from the lecture notes. He indicates, correctly, that the classroom text was the Modern Library edition, *Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka* translated by Willa and Edwin Muir, introduction by Philip Rahv, 1952 edition. What is surprising is that he is not struck by the sparsity of markings in Nabokov's copy of that volume. After all, here is a work in a language in which Nabokov was not adept. One might expect a heavily marked text since, as noted, the less Nabokov felt secure about a language, the more work he put into his preparation.

There is actually another edition of *Metamorphosis* in Nabokov's library which Bowers did not see. It is the Vanguard Press edition, 1946, second printing, translation by A.L. Lloyd. Every page of this edition — which has extra-wide margins and double-spaced lines — is marked by Nabokov. The preface by Paul Goodman is an essay discussing Kafka in a Freudian light — to which Nabokov responds in the margins: "What utter trash" and "this drivel should be disregarded."

The text proper carries a word by word, line by line, correction of Lloyd's translation of *Metamorphosis*. Mrs. Nabokov explained to me that in preparation for the lectures, she and her husband sat side by side, with the original German and Lloyd's translation, going through the text word by word, correcting as they went. She provided the literal translation, he did the rest. Nabokov needed his wife's superior knowledge of German in order to discover Kafka's art. It should be noted that Nabokov never did this sort of total retranslation of any Russian or French text which he taught; with *Don Quixote*, since he had no Spanish at all, he relied entirely on the English translation.

The extensive notations in this previously unknown source text gives us Nabokov's earliest responses to *Metamorphosis* — which are different from the completed lectures, as reconstructed by Bowers. Marginal notations indicate numerous textual questions to be answered, make points not presented by Bowers, and present drawings which do not appear elsewhere — of the Samsa's apartment, and of the large beetle, Gregor, on a chair reaching up to the window.

The edition supplies emphatic proof that Nabokov's German, as he always said, was not strong; his wife's assistance was essential. It should put to rest the question of the degree to which Nabokov knew German and knew Kafka at any time prior to his preparation of the Cornell lectures.

III. RUSSIAN LITERATURE ANTHOLOGY

The primary text in Nabokov's course on the history of Russian literature in translation was Bernard Guilbert Guerney's *A Treasury of Russian Literature*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1943. Boyd states that Nabokov began using Guerney in 1952 when he first offered the course at Cornell, along with "his own *Three Russian Poets*, his mimeographed *Song of Igor's Campaign*, and his own embryonic *Eugene Onegin*."³ Six years later in the fall of 1958, his last semester at Cornell, when I was a student in his classes, *Three Russian Poets* was no longer used, and the required texts were still the Guerney anthology, the Guerney translation of *Dead Souls*, and a mass of mimeographed materials prepared by Nabokov, including the

³ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, p. 220.

manuscript copies of *The Song of Igor's Campaign* and *Eugene Onegin*, neither of which had yet been published.

It is not clear when Nabokov actually obtained the Guernev anthology; possibly as early as 1948 when he considered giving a literature survey course at Wellesley. The volume is copiously marked in grey pencil, red pencil, and pen, affirming its long usage. The notations in the front of the text envision a course much different than the one he actually taught at Cornell, and is, most likely, Nabokov's first conception of such a course.

"In my choice of required reading matter," Nabokov pens on the page facing the Table of Contents, "I have been, of course, limited by the small number of good translations available but on the whole, this gives an adequate picture of the best in Russian literature." What follows is a listing of "Required Readings" and the note: "The asterisk means translated into English by V. Nabokov publ. and unpubl. (distrib in mimeogr. sheets)." He then strikes out items in the Table of Contents, adds others, and places asterisks.

The authors he removes are Athanasii Nikitin, Ivan Dmitriev, Mikhail Saltykov, Nikolai Leskov, Vsevolod Garshin, Dmitri Merezhkovski, Leonid Andreev, Fyodor Sologub, Alexander Kuprin, Arkadii Averchenko, and Valery Briussov. The authors he adds are: Avaakum, Nikolai Karamzin, Evgenii Baratinski, Fyodor Tiutchev, Konstantin Batiushkov, Alexander Griboedov, Nikolai Nekrasov, Afanasii Fet, Vladislav Khodasevich and "a few samples from the better Soviet authors such as Mayakovskii, Zoshchenko, Olesha, and Pasternak." He then notes: "Text Books. Guernev A Treas or Russian Lit. I recommend Mirsky and my book on Gogol."

The asterisked items — those he had translated or intended to translate — are: "Avaakum (Passages from memoirs)," "Zhukovskii (two ballads)," "Baratinski (poems)," "Pushkin (passages from Eug. Oneg, Mozart and Salieri, City of Plague, monologue from The Covetous Knight, numerous short poems)," "Lermontov (poems)," "Tiutchev (numerous poems)," "Batiushkov (poems)," "Koltsov (poems)," "Griboedov (passages from Woe from Wit)," "Nekrasov (poems)," "Fet (poems)," and finally, "Block [sic] (The Twelve and other poems)."

Nabokov also changes the readings for some of Guernev's authors. For instance, he adds Gogol's "*Dead Souls* in the Guernev trans. only"; under Dostoevsky he adds *Crime and Punishment* to Guernev's *Notes from the Underground*; under Tolstoy, he deletes all the Guernev selections and puts in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* (with the "a", incidentally, intact — further evidence that this is an early conception of the course). Nabokov actually never taught *War and Peace*, nor did he teach Chekhov's "Three Sisters," the text of which, in this edition, is notated.

Extensive notations in the Guernev volume are reserved for: *The Song of Igor's Campaign*, Derzhavin's "God," Pushkin's "Queen of Spades," Gogol's "The Carrick" [The Overcoat] and "Inspector General," Belinskii's "Letter to Gogol," Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (done thoroughly), Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilyich," (not known by Bowers) and Blok's "The Twelve."

These several volumes are all that I have time for today. They are but a sampling of the riches to be found in Vladimir Nabokov's books.