New Light on Nabokov's Russian Years

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The reviewers who called my life of Nabokov "definitive" have obviously never written a biography or thought much about the genre. A "definitive" biography presupposes some complete possession of the truth, which only a madman would claim. As Nabokov himself says, "You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you can never get close enough ... You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it's hopeless."[1]

Shakespeare's legacy has been subject to closer scrutiny than perhaps anybody except God's, and yet he remains just as hidden behind *his* creation as God behind His. But last year a computer study of the plays seemed to indicate which parts Shakespeare himself played in performances of his works — usually two rather minor roles, often characters who are old or lame or carry a stick, suggesting that he might well have been lame himself. If these findings are right, our concrete knowledge of Shakespeare outside the texts of the plays has almost been doubled, after four hundred years of staring at the man.

I don't have anything nearly so sensational to report on Nabokov: no lurking Lolitas, no clandestine trips to the Soviet Union, no authenticated visitations from beyond the grave.

But two events have stirred up new evidence about Nabokov's life: the changes in the land of his birth, and the publication of the biography. The arrival of *glasnost* and the rehabilitation of Nabokov in the Soviet Union made it possible for me to have access to eight different archival institutions in Leningrad and Moscow. And the publication of the biography prompted reviewers, readers, translators and scholars to offer me corrections or additions.

One other change I must mention. The Nabokov archives in Montreux have been sold to the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library. For more than a decade I worked with the privilege and the burden of being the first to have free access to the papers in Montreux and the Library of Congress. I always felt it my responsibility to make available all the key information I found there that as far as I knew other living scholars might never be allowed to see. That made the two volumes of the biography fatter than they should have been, fatter than they would have been if that material had all been publicly available. Some reviewers griped at the bulk of the book, but I had to make all the essentials accessible, and I can tell you it's a great relief, first, to have it done, and now to know that the Berg collection materials may soon be ready for consultation by others.

The new finds start very early in Nabokov's life. I had the birthday right — thank Heavens — but not the christening. Vera Nabokov and Nabokov's sister Elena were sure that he was baptised at home. No: "the newborn Nabokov narrowly escaped being christened Victor by a bungling archpresbyter in a ceremony" not at 47 Morskaya but at the church of St. Spiridon Timifuntsky's.

That was easy to fix. But as Nabokovians know, time is a much more slippery medium than space.

In *Speak, Memory,* Nabokov repeatedly reproduces images he has preserved as brightly as any calendar photograph--but with the year and the month ripped off. "To fix correctly, in terms of time, some of my childhood recollections," he confesses, "I have to go by comets and eclipses, as historians do when they tackle the fragments of a saga."[2] He vividly recollected traveling by train through the St. Gothard tunnel — chugging in during a thunderstorm, bursting out into the light and a rainbow across a crag — as he headed with his family for

[1] *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 11.
[2] *Speak, Memory* (New York: Putnam, 1966), 25.

Milan and Abbazia. In the late 1940s, when he was planning his autobiography, he first dated that memory to 1905, but then settled on 1904, perhaps because of Iosif Hessen's memoir, which also dated the Nabokov family's Abbazia trip to that year. But Nabokov had been right first time, as three letters from his father to three different correspondents in three different St. Petersburg archives show. In fact it turns out the family left for Italy very shortly after Bloody Sunday, after V.D. Nabokov's denunciation of the killings in the St. Petersburg City Duma, and apparently after Elena Nabokov's nervous reaction to the killings in Mariinskaya Square convinced him that such a move was necessary. Hessen's note summoning V.D. Nabokov back to Russia was in the early fall of 1905, not 1904, just before the general strike broke out and the Constitutional Democratic Party was formed. Elena Nabokov and her children returned to Russia sometime over the winter of 1905-1906, and stayed at Vyra rather than in town.

Now this may not seem to matter all that much, but it is after all of interest to know when the greatest Russian writer since Chekhov learnt to write in Russian. Nabokov assigns the date of summer 1905 to his father's alarmed discovery after visiting the family from the capital that his two sons could read in English but not in Russian, and his requesting the village teacher Zhernosekov to instruct them, and young Volodya's delight in strolls with this ardent Socialist Revolutionary. But the contemporary documentary evidence proves that in fact the Nabokov family were all in Italy from February that year until the next winter.

When then did Nabokov really share those country rambles with Zhernosekov and hear him "speak of humanity and freedom ... and the sad (but interesting ...) necessity of blowing up tyrants"?[3] When did he learn to write in Russian? Perhaps the summer of 1904? But in 1904 V.D. Nabokov was in touch with his sons all year; and he would hardly have been aghast that Sergey, who had just turned four, could read English but not Russian; and in any case the family spent very little time at Vyra. That leaves us with 1906, when V.D. Nabokov was indeed away most of the summer in the capital, playing an active role in the First Duma, while the family stayed at Vyra. And that year, with censorship abolished, Russia radicalized, the Socialist Revolutionaries riding high, political assassinations rampant, and V.D. Nabokov openly opposed to autocracy, a village schoolteacher could have made fiery declarations to his bright young charges in a way he could not possibly have done in 1904.

That steers us towards the rather surprising conclusion that the precocious Nabokov did not learn to read and write in Russian until he was seven. It also seems to force us to accept that Nabokov had already started to learn French from Mlle Miauton before he began to master the Cyrillic alphabet. Some have suggested that Nabokov's verbal inventiveness in English may result from his outsider's view of the language. Now it seems he may have also been more of an outsider than we thought even in his own native language — and perhaps D. Barton Johnson will see this as a further explanation for the strange magic of letters in Nabokov's Russian.

Adjusting new information like this to the old feels like separating out the ingredients of a meal you have already served up and then attempting to cook it all again, adding everything to the pot in a different sequence. Thank God, most of the new light on Nabokov doesn't involve corrections, but simply additions.

Among the most useful kinds of information are insights into Nabokov's character. Naturally there's not much one can expect for the early years, but I did find something new. After taking Dmitri to the 1944 thriller *The Lodger* (the upstairs lodger is Jack the Ripper), Nabokov witnessed Dmitri's alarm night after night at the thought that their upstairs neighbor at 8 Craigie Circle, Cambridge, might turn out to be a murderer. Nabokov reflected at the time, in a letter that had eluded me: "Comparing my childhood and his, I somehow recall far

[3] *Speak, Memory,* 28-29.

more fears, obsessions, nightmares, than he generally feels. There was a picture in one book that caused me such a secret terror (though it showed nothing special) that the book's presence on my shelf was unbearable."[4] In *Speak, Memory,* he stresses the extraordinary sense of happiness and security of the sunny daylit hours of his childhood; he does not dwell on these intense nocturnal fears. And it's worth remembering that he admits to having to endure "a good, long nightmare" a couple of times a week throughout his adult life.[5] Some readers recoil at what they see as the bleak and monstrous world of Nabokov's fiction; those who know Nabokov better or like him more probably see his view of life as much brighter than it might seem to a superficial reader of *The Defense* or *Laughter in the Dark* or *Despair* or *Bend Sinister* or *Transparent Things*; but it can be difficult to reconcile Nabokov's sense of the sunniness of his past and his present with all the shadows of his invented worlds. In the biography I have suggested that in his fiction Nabokov deliberately inverted his own positives in order to test them. But perhaps those intense bouts of nighttime terror, week after week, from childhood to old age, form another part of the answer.

Speaking of Nabokov's sunniness. Some reviewers who find Nabokov icy thought I had much too warm and radiant a view of him (perhaps it's true: on the rare occasions when *I* have a nightmare, I wake myself up out of it). One such reader was Ronald Hingley, the man who in reviewing *Speak, Memory* voiced a similar criticism of the first book on Nabokov, Page Stegner's, and declared that Nabokov's "works in general secrete about as much milk of human kindness as a cornered black mamba." For that, Nabokov kindly made him one of the dummies in *King, Queen, Knave.*

In light of these radically divergent views of Nabokov's moral make-up, it's fascinating to see the first independent assessment of his character. I found this in the Tenishev archive in St. Petersburg at the time of the Moscow Nabokov conference two years ago. One of Nabokov's teachers early in 1914 — unfortunately nameless — had an astonishingly shrewd eye for his pupils. In reports on Nabokov's class, he provides perceptive, probing, frank analyses of each boy. One, though "very capable, hardworking, serious," is "painfully fond of himself." Another is "lazy, behind in all his courses. Hundreds of justifications and excuses of all sorts. Bully and tell-tale. Crafty, cunning, deceitful: when up to no good, looks you in the eye all innocent." Nabokov's friend Samuil Kyandzhuntsev, though "a very good worker," has "a dose of cunning, prankishness and overfamiliarity [that] demands constant and attentive supervision." Nabokov's even closer friend Samuil Rosov emerges as the model student: "Very serious, conscientious, capable, restrained, independent boy. Fine pupil." At the other end of the class sits the backward giant Grigoriy Popov: "simple, limited; experienced in life, remote from and even hostile to school studies, coarse in pranks, jokes, witticisms, always ready for a fight, Popov makes teaching a trial. In difficult moments of the excursion, despite physical strength, proved very weak-spirited, feeble and near tears."

Nabokov remembers himself at school as a foppish boy with a slim Swiss watch, and full of disdain for the oppressive communality of the school. But his teacher did not see him that way at all: "Zealous soccer-player, excellent worker, respected as comrade by both flanks (Rosov-Popov), always modest, serious and restrained (though not averse to a joke), Nabokov creates a most agreeable impression by his moral decency." Not arrogant, aloof, cruel; and no one else in the class, not even Rosov, earns a comment anything like that extraordinary evaluation of a fourteen-year-old's moral character.

There are unique records of Tenishev School in four different archives in St. Petersburg. Together, they constitute one of the two most important new sources for Nabokov's life. We learn from them the irony that Prince Tenishev was a nineteenth-century positivist who insisted on the utilitarian role of education and strongly disliked "fine writing," novels,

[4] VN to Anna Feigin, February 5, 1944, Vladimir Nabokov Archives.
[5] *Strong Opinions,* 59.

anything with a fanciful or fabulous side. No wonder Nabokov had a hard time fitting into the school's ideals.

We also learn that Nabokov was taught Russian literature by Vasily Gippius only in his last two years at Tenishev; that in the final year, political economy, civil law, accounting and commodity studies, whatever that was, were added to the curriculum (no wonder, again, that Nabokov stayed away from classes so much); and that he was not quite as aloof from Tenishev life as he later claimed. He was on the editorial board of the school journal, *Yunaya mysl' (Young Thought),* and even co-signed an editorial obviously written under the influence of Gippius.

Perhaps the most consequential find in the Tenishev archives is that Nabokov studied German every year at school. In view of his deciphering butterfly books in German from the age of nine, his spending three months in Germany at the age of eleven, his having six and a half years of German at school, and his living in Germany for fifteen years in his twenties and thirties, it is difficult to imagine that somebody with his linguistic talents did not master considerably more German than he liked to suggest. Nevertheless, it seems quite clear that *he* thought his German rudimentary, too primitive to make it worth trying to read anything without an *en regard* translation: not even a newspaper, let alone a novel. The Tenishev records also tell us exactly what he studied: in German, for instance, his class examined Goethe's "ErlKönig," which he would echo so hauntingly in *Pale Fire.*

Although Nabokov was a mathematical prodigy as a small child, he lost that special gift in 1907, and at Tenishev his mathematics marks veered up and down as his interest flickered on and off. At the end of the spring 1916 term, he had received a "not satisfactory" for algebra, and was required to have extra lessons.

The mathematics coach his father hired for the fall 1916 term, a university student and Tenishev old boy, Lazar Rosental, died two years ago, leaving behind a memoir published last year, the first extended glimpse from outside of the young Nabokov.[6] Rosental landed the teaching job because he was already tutoring Nabokov's classmate, the poor, timid, shy, fatherless Nikolay Shustov. Shustov, who often spoke proudly to Rosental of his friend Volodya, felt eager to bestow on his teacher the honor of having such a pupil. Rosental found the friendship puzzling: Volodya "was not only from another sphere, but of another mold. And although in class he was often a ringleader, while Kolya shrank to the wall, something nevertheless linked them."

Rosental found Volodya easy to teach, though readily distracted: "He grasped what he wanted to at once. Unfortunately, his head was full of other things. Far too many other things! Receptive, well read, observant, quick-witted . . . but impulsive, spoiled, fond of himself ... yet evidently inclined to love."

Rosental recalls Nabokov showing him his first published book of verse, and a much fatter collection of his poems, typed and bound. Three and a half years later, Nabokov was publishing his verse in the emigration, and as I reported in the biography, the short-story writer Teffi already had a high opinion of his work, when he was still twenty and had yet to adopt the name Sirin. In Moscow I discovered a letter from another émigré writer, Dioneo, a year and a half later — in October 1921 — expressing to V.D. Nabokov as editor of *Rul'* his admiration for the poems *Rul'* was publishing by the new poet Sirin. Nabokov's father was delighted to receive such a tribute from someone who had no idea that Sirin was his son. "His talent is growing," he replied. "I have great hopes of him."

But the question arises, if Nabokov's talent was recognized so early in the 1920s, why was the first instalment of *The Defense* in *Sovremennye zapiski* in 1929 such a bombshell? Another letter I found in Moscow, from Nina Berberova to Yuli Aykhenvald, helps explain the

[6] "Neprimechatel'nye dostovernosti," *Nashe nasledie,* 1991:1, 104-06.

apparent discrepancy. After someone had passed on to her in 1927 a copy of *Rul'* with an Aykhenvald review of her work, she wrote to Aykhenvald: "You can't imagine how rarely your newspaper is seen in Paris." Before the instalment of *The Defense,* Nabokov had been publishing almost exclusively for *Rul'* and for Iosif Hessen's Berlin-based publishing house Slovo. If Sirin had been overlooked since he switched from verse to prose, that was largely a consequence of his decision to stay in Berlin and to continue publishing primarily in *Rul'.*

There are other incidental finds that illuminate Nabokov's reputation, or the genesis of this work or the interpretation of that, or his role as lepidopterist or teacher in the U.S. But let me finish with an example that shows how information about Nabokov's life can open doors into his art.

I mentioned two major reasons for the flood of new information on Nabokov: the changes in Russia, and the publication of the biography. So far all the examples but one have been from material that came to light in a freer Soviet Union. Now I would like to turn to the most valuable response I have had from a reader of the biography.

This reader's name was Sergey Kaplan. You may recall that between 1925 and 1927 Nabokov acted as tutor to two boys from wealthy Russian-Jewish émigré families. One was Alexander Sak; the other was Kaplan; for neither of them did I have any information about their whereabouts after the 1920s, and the chances of their having survived if they stayed in Germany were of course almost zero. But late last year I received a letter, postmarked Oberlingen, from Kaplan, who had fled to Belgium and France but eventually returned to settle in Germany.

When he became Nabokov's pupil, Kaplan was sixteen and already semi-fluent in English. In their weekly hour-long English class, Nabokov simply conversed with the boy, mostly about literature. At the end of the first class, he started to tell him about Sinclair Lewis's *Babbit,* which Kaplan bought in a Tauschnitz edition. They read it aloud, Nabokov correcting Kaplan's pronunciation, and discussed it a few chapters at a time each lesson. Then came Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy,* which fascinated the student and repelled his teacher. Nabokov then set his own curriculum, reading and discussing first Shelley, Keats and Byron, then Kipling, Somerset Maugham, Wells, Stevenson, Conrad, and finally discussing, if not actually reading together, *Ulysses.* After about a year of the English lessons, Nabokov began to help Kaplan for another hour a week with the boy's more hesitant French, exposing him first to Flaubert, at that time Nabokov's favorite author in any language, then Giraudoux's *Bella,* an introduction to Proust, and some Rostand, Rimbaud, Verlaine and Maurois. Kaplan's schoolteachers could not understand his rapid progress in French. The boy knew whom to thank: Nabokov's "enthusiasm," he later recalled, "was equal to his brilliant methods."

What should make a good Nabokovian gasp here is not the inevitable Proust and Joyce but the two *American* books of the 1920s.

In *Mary* (1926), his only novel prior to *King, Queen, Knave* (1928), Nabokov had unconsciously been following what threatened to become a fashionable novelistic formula, in the isolated but neatly diversified group he had gathered in the boarding house. Now, in his second novel, the first he started after taking Kaplan on as his pupil, Nabokov deliberately attacked two fashionable novels.

George Babbit in Sinclair Lewis's 1922 novel of that name rapidly became the standard image of the standardized mind of the businessman. Nabokov objected to any stereotyping of people, whether by class, country, creed or profession: "our neighbor, the retired hot-dog stand operator," he wrote in *Lolita,* might turn out to have "just produced the greatest book of poetry his age has seen." In *King, Queen, Knave,* Nabokov therefore makes his businessman hero an anti-Babbit, the most imaginative character in the novel, and successful as a businessman for precisely that reason. Out of sheer fanciful curiosity Dreyer supports an

inventor of "automannequins" — robots designed to move with lifelike suppleness and bend with all the natural flexibility of muscle and skin — that Nabokov sets against Martha's steely determination.

But the other American novel casts an even sharper light on Nabokov's aims.

The first flash of *King, Queen, Knave* came to Nabokov while he was on holiday at the Baltic beach of Binz, when he had the sudden idea of a novel ending with an attempted murder-by-drowning at a Baltic beach. But the novel's inspiration was as much literary as geographical. In his foreword to the English edition of *King, Queen, Knave,* Nabokov claims that he had not read *An American Tragedy* ("preposterous stuff") at the time of writing his own novel, but his memory for dates and sequences was often precarious, and Sergey Kaplan's recollections prove that Nabokov knew Dreiser's novel, published in 1925, by 1926 at the latest. But in Dreiser, the murder disguised as an accidental drowning comes as the result of a set of relentless deterministic pressures. Nabokov hated determinism, especially in literature — hence his fierce opposition to tragedy as a form — and had already thumbed his nose at literary determinism in *Mary* by keeping Mary out of the novel, through having Ganin change his mind at the last minute and decide not to see her again. Now he took Dreyer's deterministic murder and turned it inside out. Everything that had seemed rigorously planned, everything that had appeared to turn Dreyer into an automaton controlled by Martha's design, becomes subject to caprice: the caprice of the weather, which gives Martha a fatal chill, the caprice of Dreyer's automannequin project, which he does not explain but which he suddenly announces will earn a hundred thousand dollars in one stroke, and the caprice of Martha's sudden change of heart: no matter how much she wants Dreyer dead, she will hold off the murder to secure that extra fortune. Instead, she is dead of her chill the next day.

Since conferences need controversies, I'll end my paper here, with Dreyer fighting the determinism of Dreiser, and with Boyd declaring against Alexandrov that Nabokov's worlds, whatever part fate plays in them, are always free.