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Barabtarlo Gennady

Cycnos, études anglophones
revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice
ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

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Gennady Barabtarlo

University of Missouri-Columbia

In February of 1991 I sifted through the holdings of the Edmund Wilson archive at the Beinecke Library of Yale, in search of materials pertaining to Nabokov's English short stories of the 1940s. Nabokov used to send Wilson typescripts and galley-proofs of his work; I wished to examine them and indeed found a few curious variants, some valuable. For example, the enigmatic and strangely transporting finale of "Time and Ebb" ("…*IN* Ebb" in the TS), with those mysterious swans of an unknown kind silently crossing an equally unknown Knight's Lake "in Maine", had always had a singular hold on me the nature of which it would be tricky to explain. Suffice it to say that I had suspected a crotchet here; and true enough, the name of the lake was written, in that TS, over a very real Pyramid Lake, Nevada — a very important afterthought, for I am now convinced that the Knight's Lake has much to do with the theme of Lancelot du Lac, and Lady Vivian, and the entire line of mediaeval chivalry associated with Nabokov's son, which he will so carefully fuse with the two other main thematic streams, rock climbing and space climbing, only seven years later in "Lance"[1].

Besides variant readings, the Wilson archive preserves several Nabokov documents of considerable interest, such as a two-page note on English iambics, evidently a handout from his Spring 1950 Cornell course, sent to Wilson as a routine argument in their Thirty-Years' War over prosody; and, particularly, the important annotations of Nabokov's poem "To Prince Kachurin" (1947), translated specially for Wilson. It is a three-and-a-half-page typescript, headed by Nabokov's advertisement to Wilson that "this is a very valuable document", and indeed both the translation and the commentaries are made quite in earnest. This prose translation, moreover, is not the one made for *Poems and Problems* decades later. The poem itself is unplain, even puzzling in places, and Nabokov's clarifying commentary is of much value. Here are three excerpts from it:

> From the beginning: "To Prince S.M. Kachurin (who does not exist but whom the reader is supposed to take for an old friend of the author — with something of the sonorous apostrophic intonation Pushkin gives to the names of his friends in his poems.)"
>
> From the middle: [No kak ja sjadu v poezd dachnyj, v takom pal'to, v takih ochkah, I v suschchnosti sovsem prozrachnyijj, s romanom Sirina v rukah] "But how shall I board the local, dressed as I am, wearing this overcoat, these glasses, and (in spite of my disguise) completely transparent, with a novel of Sirin (émigré novelist who was especially good at depicting nostalgic landscapes) in my hands?"
>
> From the end: "I am asking you, is it not time to return to the theme of the (Indian) bow-string, to the enchantment of the chaparal (the birds are already there) of which we read in The Headless Horseman? Is it not time to go back to Matagorda Canyon (place in Texas mountains) and there fall asleep on the burning stones — with the skin of one's face prickly dry from the aquarelle paints (with which we used to daub our faces when we played Indians) and with a crow's feather in one's hair? (in other words, let me take the direct road to America straight from my boyhood and the Wild West novels I used to love)".

II. The archive preserves about thirty letters from Nabokov to Wilson which did not appear in Professor's Karlinsky's collection, plus a number of wires and postcards. Sometimes Véra Nabokov wrote letters at her husband's bidding, to ease his load of exigencies or to ease through a delicate situation: thus, in 1959 she writes to Wilson asking him to refrain from having his 1941 blurb reprinted with the new edition of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,

[1] The original research for this paper was greatly facilitated by the NEH travel grant, while its presentation at the Nice Conference in June 1992 was made possible by a grant from the University of Missouri Research Council.

which would now sound impossibly patronizing. The real reason, however, could not be very well spelled out without casting a retroactive shadow on Wilson's good offices at a critical stage of Nabokov's life in America, and so a polite substitute had to be found (and was).

Here is the beginning of one Nabokov letter brimming with an unusual, for the space, amount of typical Nabokoviana: a Russian scholium, the familiar dental misery, a humorous report, an evocative coinage.[2] (Boyd mentions this letter in his second volume, 168):

> [3.vi.1950]: "Véra and I came back yesternight (— not many Russians know the meaning of this word) from Boston, minus my teeth — and the Mass. part of her licence — we were arrested for speeding. She did not stop when a policeman in a car signaled to her and then he followed us for ten minutes and finally, at 70 mp.h. screeched [deleted] scrowded us to the curb."

However, the most interesting additional material for the history of Wilson's complicated friendship with Nabokov can be found among Wilson's own papers. There are two main sets concerning Nabokov:

> 1. Wilson's sundry notes on Nabokov's works, dating from 1942 (actually, he did not date them but one can sometimes fix the date quite accurately since some notes were jotted on the back of a draft letter); and
> 2. The *Eugene Onegin* affair carefully collected in several chockfull folders holding a number of most curious documents.

It is not my intention to add anything of substance to the sound description of the Nabokov-Wilson counterstance offered by Karlinsky and Boyd in their respective works. I do believe that there was an ulcerous trace of envy on Wilson's part that appeared around the mid-forties, flared up several times over the years, and became especially acute after *Lolita* — not because Wilson secretly admired it (he did not) but because he thought that Nabokov succeeded commercially where he, Wilson, had failed. His envy was never Salierian.[3] Wilson's literary hospitality at the onset of their relationship and Nabokov's acknowledgment of it and his deep gratitude made the latter patient and generous even when their differences were quite obviously very sharp and as irreconcilable as they were important, particularly in matters of politics, morals, and manners. As the two drifted apart, Nabokov's gratitude to Wilson became a debt taxed at an ever higher rate. In the mid-sixties, Nabokov pointedly corrects Andrew Field's statement that there was "hardly a moment [in his commerce with Wilson] when the tension of being competitors [was] dropped" to "hardly a moment when the tension between two highly dissimilar minds, attitudes and educations is slackened."[4] While respecting Wilson's erudition and penmanship, Nabokov never misdeemed their relative worth as men of letters, but came to realize in full only too late that Wilson thought contrariwise, considering Nabokov as he did an ingenious, even brilliant but superficial and possibly imitative writer and negligible thinker — thus unwittingly following the tritest line of criticism adopted earlier by many Russians in emigration and later by many Soviet critics. Wilson did admire the amazing tenacity with which Nabokov managed to have succeeded in a totally new world (alien if not hostile to him, as Wilson stubbornly maintained) despite the untowardness of circumstances. Yet his notes preserved at Yale reveal that he thought Nabokov to be as much of a trickster in literature as he thought him to be one in life; that he misjudged the importance of Nabokov's deracination for the assessment of his writing; that, just as some of Nabokov's Russian readers, Wilson took much pain to establish the amount of Nabokov's debt to European modernism. In sum, these memoranda, which Wilson kept collecting for a future article on Nabokov, prove that no great injustice would be done by

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[2] Brian Boyd retells this letter in his *American Years*, p. 168.

[3] He did mean to hit the jackpot with his racy *Memoirs of Hecate County*: "Hecate County now hangs on the decision of the New York Court of Appeals, who ought to produce a verdict this week. It means a lot from the point of view of income, as I am counting on my new public of sex maniacs to buy 100,000 copies" (from a 1947 letter to an acquaintance).

[4] See Brian Boyd, *The American Years*, p. 494.

concluding that Wilson had read Nabokov to as little profit as he had studied Russian history (of which there is a curious additional proof in one of the notes — see below). For the first time one can glimpse what Wilson really thought of Nabokov's fiction (mostly Russian), evidently amassing notes and trying formulas for an essay which he never wrote but which he knew would "somewhat annoy" Nabokov — as he warned Véra Nabokov in 1952.[5]

Here are these notes, in my transcription.

1. On reading *Camera Obscura* (which Wilson evidently read in the original en regard with the English text).

> "V. Nabokov = mixture of elements: sordid bourgeois honor of post-war Germany with its morbid and murderous undercurrents, much as you got in German films of the period, distinctive trend of the time — the taint of a touch of merde; sexual perversity, petty and pricking sadism, Kafkaism of Central Europe general: moral situation uncertain and shifting, impending convictions <four words illegible> lose a certain amount of old-fashioned Petersburg foppery and fantasy <of> the Russian dak[6] <sic>.
> English (Americanized in spots) not so good here as has made remarkable progress in Sebastian Knight."

2. On *Despair*.

> Sterne through Gogol probably + post-war mystery novel — Dostoevsky in spite of himself, with hero, unlike Raskolnikov, betrayed … [breaks off]
> V. Nabokov (look up his father in Lenin). Mania for playing poker on people — hero <illeg.> of blissful delight of making April fools of people etc. — He is going to fool the <crowd?> and announces he will fool the reader and the upshot is a colossal joke which the author perpetrates on the hero.
> Hatred of middle class Germans in this and Camera Obscura.
> Mania for concealment and preparing and playing jokes on people without their suspecting anything — same thing with protective mimicry of butterflies. But the hero of *Despair* doesn't get away with a hoax, and the butterflies do not fool the birds and the other insects. Their complicated and elegant deception is something that has been produced gratis and pointlessly. The novelist of *Despair* and the naturalist who describes the butterflies thus has the last word and the advantage of <sic> the character and the butterflies. But the work of the imagination, after all, was not real: pathos of it being shattered by reality — so the émigré in his belletristic work" <the rest is missing>

3. On *Spring in Fialta.*

> Is this influenced by Bunin?[7] — a paint of prose and impressions that you lay on easily with a thick brush. — Paul Maurand? — Dark-haired Russian woman with violets that haunts Nabokov's works. Émigré nostalgia.

4. [Written apparently between 1942 and 1944].

> "V. Nabokov: The Petersburg dandy in aesthetic and intellectual matters. Small stingings and practical jokes — revenge against the Bolsheviks and against the Western society which has him at much a disadvantage and humiliates him and keeps him poor.[8]
> There is not really much to choose between the Chavchavadzes and Aldnavov and Nabokov for ignorance of Soviet Russia. If it was true that for the admirers of Soviet Russia, Soviet history, a different thing from Russian history, seemed to begin with the advent of Lenin. The situation with the émigrés was that Russian history had ended there, so that, though they knew all about the reigns of the Tsars, they had utterly no idea of the vicissitudes of the Revolution]. It is as if since they think it is impossible for them to go back, they also assume that it is impossible to know anything about it. <They think that> a small band of fanatical and bloody Bolsheviks seized power and have been there ever since. Stalin and Trotsky and Lenin are all

[5] *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, New York: Harpers, 1980, p. 276.
[6] Wilson spells this word, which means "eccentric", part in Russian, part in English.
[7] Wilson's proposition seems to be influenced by Bunin's "Spring in Judea"!
[8] This thesis will be used in Wilson's *Upstate*, disguised there as a contemporary journal entry.

> the same thing. See Trotsky on Aldanov in Hist. and Rev. [i.e. *The History of the Russian Revolution*]."

Two remarkably bizarre documents come from the folders with matter regarding the great *Eugene Onegin* battle of the mid-sixties. Wilson kept neat record of it all, filing away clippings of innumerable rejoinders not only from the principals but also from assorted bystanders enjoying themselves famously, chance passers-by throwing in an odd word, gamesters claiming that half of the letters to editor (particularly the one signed by a certain George Gomori) and the review, by Alan Brian, of Andrew Field's 1967 book — perhaps the book itself — perhaps, indeed, Field himself — were all of Nabokov's extravagant fabrication. Wilson, who must have found his position thoroughly uncomfortable because of the swarm of blunders and indefensible stances in his original article that Nabokov had exposed, and who was bewildered by all this gallimaufry in print and afraid that he might have missed some disguised digs of Nabokov's cunning, decided to take advantage of the gay and nasty confusion and recoup, or at least cut his losses with a bold counter-move and thereby muddy the water completely. Sometime in 1968, he drafted a pseudonymous letter to the *New Statesman* of London, with the instruction to his secretary not to type it on his stationery, for "it is part of a joke"; in that letter he takes the line that the entire rencontre has been staged by the two old pals for their own amusement — which he claims should explain, among other things, Wilson's impossible mistakes planted there on purpose. Moreover, he appropriates Nabokov's reply, brimstone and all, suggesting that the thing was written by Wilson over Nabokov's name, whereas "in the tit-for-tat that followed, Wilson's plays were composed by Nabokov." This paltry try shows with clarity just how badly smarting were the cuts Wilson had sustained in the clash. It is certainly a credit to his wit and a load off his inwit that Wilson thought better of it and apparently did not send this awfully lame thing after all.

Another curio lives in a special folder labeled "Replies to Nabokov"; therein Wilson kept a letter from an unidentifiable Russian émigré, which he doubtless considered important enough for his case (here is an ally on his vulnerable Russian side) to be transcribed in his own hand (in Russian), perhaps for easier reference in the future. The letter is so prodigiously cranky that it merits to be given in full. The ultimate blow, probably unregistered by Wilson, was the extraordinarily striking resemblance this letter bears to the style of the Double in Nabokov's "Double Talk"! Here it is, unsigned, in my translation;

> "Allow me to tell you that I have read the other day (and also Sylvia, <sic>) your excellent article about V.N. … on which occasion I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. I do so because, in the first place, you so aptly, so brilliantly, so profoundly, and so caustically let that mister have it [*oblozhili etogo gospodina*] whom we both hold in rather low esteem and whom moreover I for one (as a Russian), do not quite take for a <serious> writer, although I like his *Eugene Onegin* very much …<sic>. You are the only writer who could accomplish that tour de force and that's why it seems to me that you are the only person in the world who could, and in my opinion should translate *Eugene Onegin* into English for mankind, for Pushkin, and maybe for yourself. You hold all the aces in your hand: you are an Anglo-Saxon, a famous and profound writer, you know thoroughly the Russian language, without commanding it[9] (because you rarely speak it) and, besides, nobody feels and loves that period of Russian revolutionary life quite as you do."

One will never lean exactly which period of Russian life he calls "revolutionary", Pushkin's or his own. Wilson, as I said, was pleased enough to trouble himself with transcribing this letter and filing it away for future use.

Lastly, there are other people's letters to Wilson regarding Nabokov that elaborate on various episodes of his life and relationships. Among Nicolas Nabokov's letters there are several touchingly persistent pleas to Wilson to help his cousin which begin as early as the Spring of

[9] The non-word in the original reads "vladetelets" — a wild mongrel of "vladeete" (you possess) and "vladelets" (owner), which would be then the wrong term for native speaker.

1940, when the Nabokovs were still frantically looking for an exit from the European maze. One of his letters, of 14 August, 1940, is so desperate that it sounds somewhat out of Nabokov's character: Nic. Nabokov quotes his cousin as saying "ozhidaiu chuda ibo poterial nadezhdu" (I await a miracle, for I have lost hope). We all know that Wilson did extend his hand, which Nabokov gratefully shook, and we all know the rest of the story.