



## Things I Could Have Said

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# EPI-REVEL

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Things I Could Have Said

Dmitri Nabokov

I guess I should have been flattered when I learned about the concern in some quarters that my presence might intimidate the other participants in this splendid event. Actually it's the other way around: I find myself before the best Nabokov scholars in the world, many of whom know many things I don't, and I am the one who should be cowed by the thought of representing Nabokov, in a sense, in front of such illustrious Nabokovians. My intimidation is mitigated only by the happy fact that many of you were already my friends, personal or epistolary, and the rest have turned out to be wonderful people too. As for that bit of Nabocuffing and Hemingshamming laced with the Guadanini bikini, I would like to think that, in its maker's mind, that Kinbote ride was apt, funny, tasteful, and sane<sup>1</sup>.

I had planned to come for the sole purpose of greeting and hearing speakers more erudite than I. But for one reason or another the vacant balloon in my frame of the strip has gradually filled.

I could use this opportunity multiplied manifold to object bitterly and vigorously to such things as the piracy of Vladimir Nabokov's works in Russia, to lunatic or disingenuous misattributions, and worse, to the *hamstvo* that accompanies all of that; to certain translational horrors too, and not only in Russia; to what touches me most perhaps: the ignorance, nudged by certain venomous disinformation, that has created a grotesquely false image of my late parents in some quarters.

I could begin, say, by recalling that, some years ago, while singing in a festival on the aptly named Turkish island of Büyük Ada, I learned with the aid of the minimal Turkish I had acquired in six or seven days that a little of Nabokov had for the first time appeared outside the samizdat, in a chess periodical. Little did I imagine, on the strength of the low-key bit of news, the orgy of Nabokov publishing that would ensue, and grow into a unilaterally justified piracy that would end up refinancing whole sectors of the Russian economy.

I could, on this occasion, dismiss with amusement the feminist onslaughts that even Nabokov must apparently now endure, and note that to give a second's attention in a Nabokovian context to a book called *Inventing Ivanov* makes as much sense as to affirm — as some have — that Pushkin is first and foremost a negro writer, to be categorized with James Baldwin et al.; that, by a very convoluted and quite apocryphal line, I may soon be in line for the throne of all the Russias, or what's left of them; that Nabokov wrote *Novel with Cocaine*; that I wrote *The Enchanter*. I could voice the inkling that the Paris source the book's author says she consulted is one Zinaïda Shakhovskoy, perpetrator of a vicious thinly veiled little story and a vile little book about Nabokov, whom she had not even seen for the last 40 or so years of his life. The woman later admitted to someone many of us know something she swore she would never avow publicly: that she had written that stuff "against" Véra Nabokov. I am not sure whether the basic thing she could not stomach was Nabokov's genius and success, his 54 years of happy marriage, or the fact that his wife was Jewish. Perhaps the whole combination represents to her a betrayal of some folksy, tormented, pious Russian literary tradition. The Russian presses, of course, churned her out in the same unfastidious way in which they churn everything that comes along, adding to the general mis- and disinformation about the Nabokovs; and a pleasant young student named Glinka, unexpectedly admitted to my mother's dining room one evening by a cheerful maid who thought she was greeting a member of the family because he spoke Russian, dropped in again after a trip to Paris, highly perplexed that the two people he had been told in Russia to look up

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<sup>1</sup> Talk for 1992 Nice Vladimir Nabokov conference (minus the English translation of "Zvuki" with which the talk concluded, but including a brief commentary on that story).

in Paris, Zinaïda Shakhovskoy and Nikita Struve, had not spoken well at all of the Nabokovs. An unsavory journalistic adventuress with the dubious but perhaps appropriate name of Vronskaya echoed the insults in a parting shot at mother in an obituary in *The Independent*, and *Spiegel* got on the slanderwagon with some slurs of its own. It turns out that Princess Shakhovskoy was probably not Miss Smoodin's Paris source. Nevertheless, if one were a bit paranoid one might really suspect there were some anti-Nabokov, particularly anti-Véra Nabokov plot here, or perhaps it's just that genius and happiness must have their scapegoat and warm, gentle, brilliant mother must be transformed into an icy, emasculating she-Scrooge.

I would, and should, interrupt my imaginary diatribe to say that things are not all bad: a Russian of culture and sensitivity named Marina Rumyantseva has taken it upon herself to illustrate via a kind of intimate, family television documentary what Véra and Vladimir Nabokov were really like. And, in the translational field, we do have some stars: Christine Bouvart, who is among us, for example; or Serena Vitale, whose splendid new Italian version of *Dar*, directly from the Russian, recreated the substance, spirit and lyricism of Nabokov so effectively that this book, so foreign in its origins to the Mediterranean reader, even hit the best-seller lists. Or Dieter Zimmer who is gallantly soldiering on with a kind of German Pléiade. And one must not forget the gray eminence behind that and other Nabokov publishing in Germany, the late and greatly missed Ledig Rowholt; or the dedicated originator of the real Nabokov Pléiade, Gilles Barbedette, who worked bravely to the last moment until he died a most unpleasant death.

But I could not overlook such items as the revolting Albee travesty of *Lolita*, of course being staged to the hilt in Russia, or the pretty stale business of Levy-Agheev's *Novel with Cocaine* and Nikita Struve's attribution of that mediocre little book to my father. By now Struve's thesis has been exploded in every detail, the world over, and the Moscow classmates Levy describes in his novel have even been identified. To my mind all the detective work expended to trace Levy-Agheev's life, his drug-induced death and his tomb in Istanbul, a publisher's imposition of a pseudonym that did not sound Jewish, and so on, was overkill. Any reasonably observant reader of Nabokov knows he had never been to Moscow, and did not set works in which factual detail was important in real places he did not know intimately. And if that reader knows Russian and is of sound mind he will recognize the most important thing: Nabokov's culture and style would have categorically precluded such Agheevian locutions, to name a few of very many, as *zhibko pakhlo kukhney, poyti v kinoshku, priuteshen, mhe zhelalos'*, or *on grozno rignul* ["he gave a terrifying burp"]. Poor, pathetic Struve! Perhaps the strangest thing of all is that this obsessed nincompoop, with his churchly fixations and his unacademic methods, should be any kind of professor at all, much less an assistant at the Sorbonne. The only reason to exhume this decomposing canard is the recent re-publication of the book in Russia with a long essay by Struve, again pounding the Nabokov nail. But the suspicion sneaks that the neo-capitalists of the ex-Soyuz are more disingenuous than naïve, and less interested in bibliographical matters than in the profits to be made from whatever use they can improvise of the Nabokov name.

Finally, I could touch on a recent anthology of Sovietized Nabokov and the odd case of Mr. Nosik, who should have kept his *nosik* out of *Pnin*, and of his editors and publishers who should have known better than to market his abortion, especially when the excellent translation by Gene Barabtarlo in collaboration with Véra Nabokov is available in Russia.

On its very first page begins a parade of blunders and deliberate atrocities, ranging from words Nosik was incapable of translating, or did not choose to translate, like "flamboyant goon tie" which becomes simply *yarkoy rastsvetki galstuk*, to those he simply mistranslates, such as *dryakhlaya Madam Ru* who was "decayed" (*uvyadshaya*) not "decrepit," to Sovietese horrors like *dlya vzimania kvartplatī, nosil...rubakhl*, and *v rezul'tate svoikh studiy* that must

make Nabokov's ashes flutter in their urn. But the hundreds of translational blunders and grotesque locutions are not the worst of it. Nosik has a mania for improving on Nabokov, even changing the characters' names in the process. Thus the plump and earnest Betty Bliss becomes "Keti Kis", Linda Lacefield becomes "Betsi Bisershild," and so forth.

There is more, much more, in all categories. There is *o chyort* for Joan's mild "gosh," there is *svetlovatiy* for *svetlovolosiy*, the passage "while from behind that lady another twinkling old party was thrusting into her field of vision a pair of withered, soundlessly clapping hands" is rendered:

A vībirayas' iz-za spinī etoy damī, eshche odna mertsayushchaya ychastnitsa zasedaniya [etc.].

*Poshlosti* abound, such as the stylistically monstrous *amerikanskije denezhki*.

And then the Nosik improvements go into another dimension. After having translated VN's phrase "nostalgic excursions in broken English" (*nostalgicheskie ekskursy* [sic] *na lomanom angliyskom yazike*), the man has poor Pnin speak an arbitrary and distorted Russian. "Mystical" becomes *mistikal'niye*, "all this had for me signification" is grotesquely rendered *eto vsyo dlya menya bilo vazhneyshn znacheyshn*, and "so we had a very interesting discussion" (also Pnin speaking) is turned into the bizarre and gratuitous *mī imeli interesneyshn diskushn*.

Joan and Pnin suddenly begin speaking in the second-person familiar, with the insane implication that they have, in the interim, become sexually intimate.

Then there are instances of astonishing general ignorance: for example, the translation of the sentence "he delivered these stale goods with the rotund gusto of the classical Alexandrinka." The reference, as any Nosik worth his snot should know, and as Nabokov himself explains, was to a Petersburg theatre, not a *peterburgskaya drama*.

I could furnish many more such examples from this concoction, but you get the drift. I hear from one of those responsible for its publication that they hated it but were forced to include it. I had understood that such forcing no longer occurred in the new Russia, that the Writer's Union had lost its political clout, that the apparatchiks were disenfranchised, and the KGB was a dead letter. But perhaps I understood wrong. If there is anyone here who was connected with this enterprise, perhaps he will do me the favor of explaining just who it was that did the forcing. Was it, as I have been told, a certain former KGB goon suddenly turned publisher? Or was it perhaps simply a matter of economizing *russkije denezhki* by using a cheap, existing hack version? Or both?

I could mention other things: that there are at least four and possibly more Russian films more or less in the works based, more or less, on Nabokov's books. That those in charge claim to have settled matters with Nabokov's estate because they sent me a message from the unanswerable St. Petersburg public fax or through an unsuspecting Swiss businessman and, in a couple of instances, insist they have what I doubt they will obtain in foreseeable times: French or German co-production. That a recent, otherwise interesting documentary shot largely in the former Nabokov house in Petersburg starts out by presenting father as a "Nobel Laureate." That Nabokov's sparkling first novel, *Mashenka*, even though it was abbreviated for a Russian television version (of which, of course, neither heirs or agents had prior notice) was so drearily executed that its length seemed doubled. That the list of critical and journalistic howlers grows ever longer: recent gems in the press have attributed the hotel fire in *Transparent Things* to Hugh Person rather than to a disgruntled former employee, and have my father study at a Jesuit school.

On the positive side, it is true that Natalia Tolstoy has appended to an elegantly published little tome of Nabokov's poetry something I, and not only I, have suggested in the past as a partial palliative for non-payment of royalties and a reply to requests for restoration funds: the announcement, at least, that part of the proceeds from the volume would go to a Nabokov museum. It is also true that, amid the hacks, crooks, blunderers, and opportunists, there are

some sincere and gifted Nabokov scholars in Russia. And I would like to know what has happened to that implausible outstanding Nabokovian Shikhovtsev, whose informative greetings have so touched mother and me in recent years.

I could make all the above protests, and many more. But for now I shall postpone polemics. Instead, on the assumption that it is interesting not only to discuss Nabokov and his works, but also to dip into something of his own that has never been published in English, I have tugged hard and come up with a bit from the horse's mouth, something by my father that is short, but entirely new in its present linguistic livery. I would like to read to you my translation, fresh out of the printer, of his short story "*Svuki*," "Sounds."<sup>2</sup> It is among the texts, previously unpublished or uncollected in English destined for inclusion in the new Knopf short-story anthology. I have chosen it because it qualifies in its own special way for this day of biographical and autobiographical shimmers.

The piece is a kind of lyrical vignette, written in 1923, and feels, at its outset, impressionistic and somewhat unfocused. But gradually its own sharply and economically etched double minitragedy emerges, together, perhaps, with a twinge of authorial remorse. All begins blissfully. The first-person protagonist is observant, sensitive, lyrical, and happily in love. But gradually we realize that his lyricism, his love, his every perception are solipsismal to the point of callousness. His aesthetic sense is divorced from all morality. His receptivity is detached and, in the end, impersonal. He is touched in his way by a lady's qualities and quirks, by the unrequited love and somewhat pitiful persona of his pal Pal Palych, by the friendly little dog, by all that surrounds him. But his sense of vicarious penetration of everything he sees, from another's wart to an old mushroom, is supremely selfish. Not only is he indifferent to the fate of the persons and things he encounters and uses for his ends, but his aesthetic bliss is heightened by their woes, even those of the purplish scabious blooms about to be scythed. "It was delicious losing you," he says of his mistress as he turns his attention to a previously glimpsed passing girl whom, he says to the abandoned lady's spectre, he will eventually encounter. "I felt I had bathed in another's grief," he says of Pal Palych, and "the feeling was a happy one." Yet, even if he himself contributes to the woes of his mistress and of his friend, he is not deliberately evil, but, childishly, totally insensitive to the human dimension. None the less, through it all the sensitive reader will perceive the "voice" of a humane author behind the first-person character, a voice hinting at the true pity, and hence the *real* beauty, that his channel-visioned protagonist is missing. "I felt like giving him a hug, saying something full of warmth, something he needed," he thinks as he leaves the unloved Pal Palych. But he does not do it. He is akin to the art-for-art's sake gamester, to the aloof and hard-hearted Nabokov imagined by those who did not know him and have not read him well. He is also, perhaps, an intensified partial echo of an adolescent real Nabokov, who had had just such a selfish affair in very similar, and familiar, surroundings, a kind of refraction presented by a rapidly maturing Nabokov of twenty-three, who already has a quite different vision of things and who expresses, through art, his regret about a thoughtless, youthful episode. One can already recognize here, at what is after all still a very early stage of his career, a concrete confutation of the cynical art-for-art's sake *Schadenfreude* that a handful of critics have read into his work.

But, as happens with Nabokov, that is not all. There are pre-echoes of methods and metaphors that will appear in his subsequent writing; the second-person familiar used by the narrator, for instance, which we shall encounter much later in *Speak, Memory*. And a strange ambiguity that lurks beneath the story's surface, to emerge more clearly for an instant at the end. But more about that some other time.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This story was translated from Russian into French by Bernard Kreise and published as "*Bruits*" in *La Vénitienne*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.

<sup>3</sup> © 1992 Dmitri Nabokov