

B R I A N B O Y D

VLADIMIR

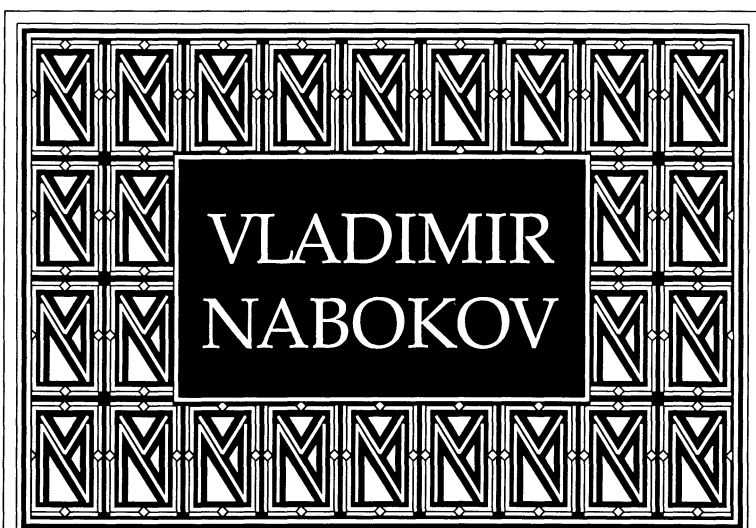
• THE AMERICAN YEARS •

NABOKOV



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THE AMERICAN YEARS

• BRIAN BOYD •

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T O
B R O N W E N

•

Life is a great
surprise. I do not see why
death should not be an even greater one.

—*Pale Fire*

It cannot be helped. I must know where I stand,
where you and my son stand. When that slow-motion,
silent explosion of love takes place in me, . . . overwhelming
me with the sense of something much vaster, much more
enduring and powerful than the accumulation of matter or
energy in any imaginable cosmos, then my mind cannot but
pinch itself to see if it is really awake. I have to make a rapid
inventory of the universe. . . . I have to have all space and all
time participate in my emotion, in my mortal love, so that
the edge of its mortality is taken off, thus helping
me to fight the utter degradation, ridicule,
and horror of having developed an
infinity of sensation and thought
within a finite existence.

—*Speak, Memory*





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VLADIMIR
NABOKOV



• I N T R O D U C T I O N •

The new blurb [for the autobiography] seems very satisfactory. I only think that the fact that I am an American citizen and an American writer should have been stressed.

—Nabokov to Harper & Bros., 1950

PNIN WOULD sail across the Atlantic on a voyage of cruel humiliation. Kinbote, ejected by fantastic history, arrived in America by parachute. Humbert Humbert showed his immigration papers, smiled stiffly, and smuggled in his secret self. All three owed their existence to the fact that at the end of May 1940, three weeks before German tanks rolled into Paris, Vladimir Nabokov and his family were at last able to flee France and sail for New York.

For years Nabokov had tried to find a job in an English-speaking country, and had landed only the promise of one session of summer-school teaching at Stanford. For months he had attempted to secure a French *visa de sortie* and then an American visa. For weeks he had struggled against his protractedly intensifying impoverishment in order to raise or borrow the money for his family's fare. For hour after hour on their last day in Paris and on the train rattling them through the night to the port of St. Nazaire, he and his wife had fretted that their six-year-old son's sudden high fever would prevent them from boarding their ship. But the next morning Dmitri had recovered, and his parents walked with him through a park down toward the waterfront, waiting for him to discern through a broken row of houses the ship that would take them to America: "We did not immediately point out to our child, so as to enjoy in full the blissful shock, the enchantment and glee he would experience on discovering. . . . a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture—Find What the Sailor Has Hidden—that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen."¹

Nabokov ends his autobiography right there. Why did he choose to end his account of his life thus far at that particular moment, in that particular way?

He completed *Speak, Memory* a decade after arriving in the United

States, five years after taking American citizenship but ten years after finding himself instantly at home in a new country, on a new continent. Through two decades of Western European emigration, he had suffered from a sense of agonizing distance from the Russia he had loved so dearly as a child. Curtained from Cambridge by his nostalgia, isolated from Berlin by language and by choice, irked by his peniless and unsettled existence in Paris, he had found in America the fulfillment of his young dreams.

As a boy, young Vladimir liked to recall a story his mother had read him about another little boy who stepped out of his bed and into the "painted path between silent trees" in a picture on his wall.² He often shivered with delight when he looked up at the framed aquarelle on his own bedroom wall, saw the painted path leading through beechwoods, and imagined himself stepping like that fairy-tale child into a painted forest. Because he sensed from the first the enchantment of America, Nabokov ends his autobiography with himself and his family walking along another path and as if about to step into a picture, as if about to make some magical transition into an unknown dimension or a new world. While still no more than nine or ten, Nabokov had also dreamed ardently of discovering new species of butterfly, as he waded with his net through the sphagnum bog some distance from his parents' manor—a bog to which they had given the name "America" because of its mystery and remoteness. Now in his forties he roamed America's West summer after summer, and his discovery of new species of butterfly and moth made these the most thrilling years of his adult life.

That path at the end of *Speak, Memory* down which three Nabokovs step forward as if into a picture also echoes the opening chapter of the book. There, the four-year-old Vladimir walks hand in hand between his parents along a garden path, and realizes with a shock their age and his, and the fact of his distinctness from each of them. It was his earliest conscious memory, and his first sense of time and self. At the end of the autobiography, Nabokov and his wife walk along another path, each holding Dmitri by one hand and anticipating the shock he will experience when he spies the funnel camouflaged by the surroundings through which it looms. Nabokov felt with a stab of pleasure that that moment of surprised discovery would stay with his son forever—as it did. He always considered that to recognize a future recollection at the moment it happened, to know with certainty that *this* particular moment would later be recalled, was somehow to cheat the tyranny of time, and that to glimpse *someone else's* future recollection was even rarer, a brief escape from the prison of the self.³

At the end of the first chapter of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov describes his father being tossed up in the air by the local villagers, in a Russian gesture of thanks for some kindness he had shown. On the third toss, he would seem to soar in the air "like one of those paradisiac personages . . . on the vaulted ceiling of a church."⁴ At the end of the autobiography Nabokov deliberately recalls that moment of live movement freezing into a picture when he and Véra lead their son forward as if into a picture puzzle. In the early chapter, Nabokov uses the image of his father floating aloft to re-create the tranquillity of his childhood, his untrammelled admiration for his father, and at the same time, by a special twist of style, to prefigure his father's senseless assassination decades later. But by a still greater miracle of style he turns his foreshadowing of that ghastly event into an affirmation of his confidence in the ultimate beneficence and harmony of things, despite all the grotesqueries and horrors of history.* In the final chapter of the autobiography, Nabokov chooses to end on a moment of triumph after years of tribulation, a surge of rapture and release despite the encroaching menace of Hitler. And by the force of his art—as we will see when we consider *Speak, Memory* in detail—he designs this real moment in such a way as to represent his sense of an unseen design behind the apparent chaos of life, an unimaginable freedom beyond even the keenest thrills consciousness allows.

Nabokov chose to end *Speak, Memory* by singling out a moment that looked ahead to a radiant America over the horizon. In fact the years between his arrival in the United States and his composing his autobiography had agonies of their own he simply chose to ignore. For Nabokov as a writer, there were fiercer torments ahead of him in 1940 than there had been even in 1919, when he had had to leave Russia forever. *Then* he had worried that he might not be able to develop his Russian as he wanted in the inhospitable climate of exile. Against the odds, he had succeeded, but *now*, after decades of turning his language into a tool more flexible and responsive in his hand than in those of any of his contemporaries, he had to abandon it altogether and write in English.

As a Russian writer, Nabokov had long been hailed by the small but highly literary émigré audience as the most exciting new talent to emerge since the Revolution. Now on his arrival in America he would have to abandon entirely this hard-earned fame and to win respect over again from scratch, at midcareer, in a new language, at

* See Vladimir Nabokov: *The Russian Years*, pp. 7–12.

a time when to be a Russian émigré seemed deeply suspect to much of the American literary intelligentsia.

In Europe he had devoted almost all his time to writing, first by design and then, after Dmitri's birth, by necessity, when other sources of income would have been welcome but proved impossible to obtain, not only in the trap of Hitler's Germany but even in unwelcoming France. Over the ten years prior to his crossing the Atlantic, he had written six and a half novels, two full-length plays, and over thirty stories. In America, where he had to divide his time and energy among the roles of teacher, scientist, translator, critic, and creative writer, it would take him six years to complete his first novel. In his forties, with a family to support, he could land no secure job until almost the end of the decade.

When he began to write his autobiography he still had no security, and yet despite all the uncertainties of his American existence he had planned from the first the book's buoyant conclusion. Unknown to him at the time, that ending in a sense contained within it the solution to the residual frustrations of his new life in America. *Speak, Memory's* first scene and its last show a young boy walking hand in hand between his parents. A loving family had provided Nabokov with an unexampled serenity of mind that allowed him, despite the most jarring intrusions of history—a revolution, his father's assassination at the hands of rabid Russian monarchists, the death of his brother and close friends in German concentration camps—to affirm his confidence in the underlying generosity of life. Despite the advancing shadow of Hitler at the end of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov focuses on two parents tenderly watching over the growth of their child's mind.

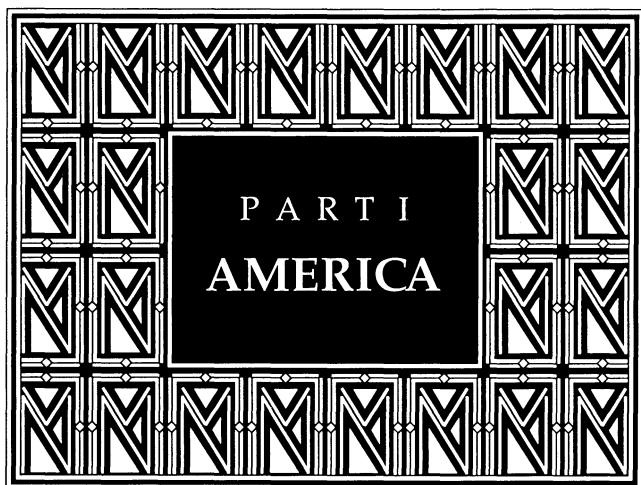
The sentiments so evident in this conclusion—his regard for the harmony of family love and his conviction that it somehow reflected the essential kindliness of life—had led Nabokov, as so often before, to test his ideas against their apparent inversion or negation. In 1939 he had imagined the tale of a man who marries a woman only to become the stepfather to the young daughter he really craves. Although he did set the story down in Russian, it remained unpublished and he came to deem it unsatisfactory. But the idea was still part of his mental baggage as he stepped down toward the Atlantic with his son.

By the time he began to write his autobiography, the idea of this Russian novella had expanded into the outline for an English—or rather an American—novel about a man who makes his young stepdaughter the prisoner of his lust. Humbert might wish to introduce Lolita to Baudelaire or Shakespeare, but his false relationship to her,

his breach of her mother's trust, and his crushing of her freedom mean he can only stunt her growth: he is the inverse of those parents who at the end of *Speak, Memory* welcome, in unspoken harmony, another "blissful shock" of discovery awaiting their child. Unlike them, he takes no thought for the memories with which he will burden the child in his care. And yet despite all that he inflicts on her, Humbert cannot quite crush Lolita's spirit.

Nabokov hoped his autobiography would win him wider recognition and some financial security. It did not. He expected little but his own artistic satisfaction from the novel he was ruminating at the same time: unlike his autobiography, *Lolita* could never be published chapter by chapter in the *New Yorker*, and might not be publishable at all. Nabokov did not foresee that by accepting the imaginative and intellectual challenge of inventing values that so thoroughly inverted his own, he would shock the public into taking notice. He had no inkling that Humbert's story would not only regain for him the literary reputation he had had to leave behind when he emigrated, but would also bring him for the first time the kind of wealth and fame that would allow him to devote himself solely to writing, to cross the Atlantic again in triumph, to regain Europe, to retain America, to carry his words around the world.

One last comment, for the moment, about the final scene of Nabokov's autobiography. As he walked toward the shore with Dmitri, Nabokov recognized the funnel ahead and said nothing, to let his son experience for himself the shock of "discovering ahead the ungenerously gigantic, the unrealistically real prototype of the various toy vessels he had doddled about in his bath." He ends *Speak, Memory* on this note partly because it sums up his whole artistic credo: his desire to prepare for his readers the sublime surprise of discovery, a surprise that he knows he would ruin were he to point it out himself. Throughout his work he wants to make us gasp with wonder when we see how real things can be behind all that we take for granted; to impart a sense of the artful, deceptive munificence of life, concealing miracles of generosity behind the everyday; to suggest that the world before our eyes is a puzzle, but that its solution lies before us, and that we may somehow be headed toward the "blissful shock" of discovering life's great surprise.



• *P R O F E S S O R N A B O K O V* •

In America I'm happier than in any
other country. . . . I feel intellectually at
home in America. It is a second
home in the true sense
of the word.

—*Strong Opinions*



Refuge: New York and Stanford, 1940–1941

Today, in a new and beloved world, where I have learned to feel at home as easily as I have ceased barring my sevens . . .

—*Speak, Memory*

I

NABOKOV had left Russia in 1919 on a crowded little cargo ship, playing chess with his father on its deck as Bolshevik machine guns strafed the waters of Sebastopol harbor. Now at the end of May 1940, despite having been desperately poor for years, he managed to flee France in style. In gratitude for his father's resolute attacks almost four decades before on Russia's officially sanctioned anti-Semitism, the Jewish refugee charity organization that had chartered the *Champlain* assigned Nabokov and his family a huge first-class cabin, as if to offer them a foretaste of their eventual fortunes in America.

The crossing was rough on the stomach but calm on the nerves (a private bath every morning!)—or as calm as the war would permit. At St. Nazaire the French *sureté* had caught two German spies aboard the vessel. Out in the Atlantic, a strange jet of vapor pluming above the gray seas prompted two jumpy young seamen to fire the ship's new antisubmarine guns—but it was only a whale. Yet the alarm was real enough: on its next trip to the U.S., the ship was sunk by a German U-boat.¹

On May 28, 1940, the *Champlain* glided through a lilac morning mist past the Statue of Liberty and docked at the French Line pier. After twenty years as stateless Europeans subject to officious bureaucracy at every border, the Nabokovs savored their arrival in America as an awakening from a nightmare to a glorious new dawn. At the customs hall, unable to find the key to their trunk (it turned up later in Véra Nabokov's jacket pocket), they had to wait, while Nabokov "stood bantering," as he later recalled, "with a diminutive Negro porter and two large Customs men until a locksmith arrived and

opened the padlock with one blow of his iron bar. The merry little porter was so fascinated by that simple solution that he kept handling the padlock until it snapped shut again." On top of the things in the opened trunk lay the two pairs of boxing gloves Nabokov used for coaching sessions with Dmitri. The two customs officers immediately put them on and began to spar, dancing around Nabokov, while a third customs man studied the small portion of the butterfly collection Nabokov had been able to bring and suggested a name for one species. As Nabokov retold the story decades later, still enchanted by America's easygoing, good-natured atmosphere, he repeated with delight: "Where would that happen? Where would that happen?"²

Standing beside their checked and chalk-marked trunk, Nabokov asked Véra where she thought he could get a newspaper. "Oh, I'll get one for you," said one of the customs men, and came back in a minute with a *New York Times*. Nathalie Nabokoff, the ex-wife of Vladimir's cousin Nicolas, was to have met them with Nabokov's old Cambridge friend Robert de Calry, but the times had been confused and there was no one waiting. They had to take a taxi—to Nabokov it looked like a very shiny, very gaudy bright yellow scarab—to Nathalie Nabokoff's apartment at 32 East 61st Street. Towering new and strange around them, Manhattan somehow looked more vividly hued than Europe, like one of those new colored photographs, and the novelty of the whole scene made the short ride seem to take an age. At their destination they glanced at the meter and registered not the actual 90 cents but "nine, o, oh God, ninety, ninety dollars." The only money they had—what was left over after Paris friends and well-wishers had chipped in for their tickets—amounted to little more than a hundred dollars. Still, what could Véra do but fish out their hundred dollar bill and hand it over? "Lady," said the cabbie, "if I had that money, I wouldn't be sitting here driving a car." And of course, Nabokov added as he retold this story too, "the simplest way for him would have been to give us \$10 change and call it a day."³

The newcomers stayed a few days in Nathalie Nabokoff's apartment, then moved across the corridor into the rooms of an actress who was setting off on tour. By June 10 they had found a cheap summer sublet at 1326 Madison Avenue in the apartment of a couple named Lehovich. Oddly enough, Mrs. Lehovich was a niece of the Countess Panin, who had given the Nabokov family a refuge on her estate in the Crimea in 1917, when they were fleeing not Hitler but Lenin.⁴

II

By the time Paris fell to the Germans on June 14, the Nabokovs' former apartment on rue Boileau was already a heap of rubble and the first Russian emigration was in much the same state. New York would become a publishing capital for Russian émigrés—as it is to this day—but the first emigration Nabokov had been part of was over. He had taken his "First Papers" immediately upon arrival in America,⁵ and he would soon become an American citizen, an American writer, whose friends were almost all American rather than Russian.

But the momentum of twenty years was not dispersed at once. "Vladimir Sirin's" arrival in New York was noted by the city's daily Russian newspaper, *Novoe russkoe slovo* (*New Russian Word*). He was indeed still Sirin:* he planned to finish at least one more Russian novel, *Solus Rex*, and during his first month in America he set down in Russian his impressions of Paris at war and composed a lofty epitaph for the entire emigration.⁶ At the end of the month *Novoe russkoe slovo* interviewed him about his impressions of his new niche. He felt himself splendidly at home, he answered.

Still, you have to learn to live here. I went up to a self-serve machine, to drink a cup of cold chocolate, put in a nickel, turned the handle, and watched the chocolate pour straight onto the floor. With my absent-mindedness, I had forgotten to put a glass under the tap. . . .

One day I went into a barber's shop. After a few words with me the barber said: "You can see at once that you are an Englishman, you have just arrived in America, and you work in the papers." "How did you figure that out?" I asked, surprised by his penetration. "Because your pronunciation is English, because you haven't had time to wear out your European shoes, and because you have the high forehead and the sort of head typical of newspaper workers." "You're Sherlock Holmes himself," I flattered the barber. "Who's Sherlock Holmes?"⁷

Nabokov's first contacts were naturally within the Russian community. He called on Sergey Rachmaninov, who had twice sent him small amounts of money in his days of direst European poverty,

and I was eager now to thank him in person. During our first meeting at his flat on West End Avenue, I mentioned I had been invited to teach summer school at Stanford. On the following day I got from him a carton with several items of obsolete clothing, among which was a cutaway (presumably tailored in the period of the Prelude), which he hoped—as

* His nom de plume as a Russian writer since 1921.

he said in a little note—I would wear for my first lecture. I sent back his well-meant gift.^{8*}

Mikhail Karpovich, the Harvard history professor he had first met and liked in Prague in 1932, invited the Nabokovs to join them at their summer home in Vermont. Meanwhile Nabokov spent the early summer searching for some sort of literary, academic, publishing, or library job, writing to people like George Vernadsky, the Yale historian, Philip Mosely, a Russian historian at Cornell and a keen Sirin fan, and Mikhail Chekhov, the writer's nephew and now a theatrical director. But for the moment Nabokov's financial prospects were no better than in Europe. Once again he was reduced to accepting a small handout—this time, a grant from the Literary Fund, a Russian organization that helped writers and scholars in America—and after the summer vacation he would be compelled to return to language tutoring once more.⁹

Nabokov met Altagracia de Jannelli, the New Yorker who for five years had been acting as his "literary (or rather, anti-literary) agent—a short, fearsome, bandy-legged woman, her hair dyed an indecent red." She demanded from him a genteel book with attractive heroes and moral landscapes, and forbade him to write in Russian. His talks with New York's commercial publishers convinced him that he would have to write something salable like a mystery novel, if only he could manage without clipping his muse's wings.¹⁰

Although he had no prospects, America kept him buoyant in spirits. Only one thought oppressed him: his close Jewish friends left behind in France, like George and Iosif Hessen, *Sovremennye zapiski* editor Ilya Fondaminsky, and his more recent friends, the harpists Elizaveta, Marussya, and Ina Marinel. Above all his thoughts were with Véra's cousin Anna Feigin, with whom he and his family had lived for years in Berlin. She had not intended to leave at the time the Nabokovs sailed from France, but as Paris fell to Germany she managed to escape to Nice and began to try to reach the United States. Nabokov would spend much energy over the next year obtaining a visa for her—his friend Karpovich would stand surety for her, as he had for Nabokov himself—and for the Marinel sisters.¹¹

III

On July 15 the Nabokovs left the mugginess of New York for the Karpovich summer home, the farmhouse on an old maple farm in

* Rachmaninov also gave Nabokov an ultramarine suit that he *did* wear at Stanford.

West Wardsboro, Vermont. This building, with its clapboards badly in need of repainting and starting to sag and spring, was far more modest than the brick-and-timber mansion that in chapter 5 of *Pnin* houses a small summer gathering of Russian émigré intellectuals, but the setting and the atmosphere were the same: a sea of greenery, maple, beech, tacamahac, and pine that Nabokov told an interviewer “looks like some parts of Siberia”—where he had never been—and a decidedly un-Russian fauna: hummingbirds, great sulky porcupines, eerie, elegant skunks.¹²

When still a young man, Mikhail Karpovich had come to America as a minor diplomat, and stayed on after the Revolution. Now at Harvard, he had become the virtual doyen of Russian studies in the United States, for although he wrote little, his students included most of the distinguished American historians of Russia. A magnetic man with a wide personal influence, he had a dynamic concern for herding up living Russians, and did more for Nabokov than any other Russian in America. In 1942, with Mark Aldanov, he would set up *Novyy zhurnal* (*New Review*), a “thick journal” that filled some of the gap left by the Paris *Sovremennye zapiski* and that is now approaching its fiftieth year.

Harvard sociologist Nikolay Timashev and his family were among the guests that summer. Timashev felt that being at the Karpoviches’ was like living back in the Russian countryside: “How many fascinating conversations, so typical of the Russian intelligentsia! I recall especially the summer of 1940, when V. V. Nabokov-Sirin was a guest there. We set up a manuscript journal, ‘Days of Our life,’ with Nabokov, my late wife, Karpovich and others contributing: local news, humor, verse, and comic polemics mostly about the meaning of various Russian words.”¹³ Two zany literary parodies by Nabokov, recently rediscovered in 1940 issues of *Novoe russkoe slovo*, seem likely to have been written for this journal: nothing else would seem to account for their romping holiday spirit.¹⁴

Turning this Vermont setting into fiction, Nabokov gives *Pnin* a near heart attack after a game of croquet so vigorous it surprises the rather cerebral scholars that make up his company at Cook’s Castle. Photographs of the Nabokovs’ two summers at West Wardsboro, 1940 and 1942, record a much less staid and rarefied world and a much younger one: playhuts and hammocks; a tanned Nabokov, stripped to the waist, so lean and wiry that his ribs show, lolling on a blanket or pushing Dmitri on a mail-order race wagon.

None of the photographs records what made Nabokov’s vacation unforgettably thrilling: the chance to fulfill his lifelong dream of catching butterflies on another continent. Before leaving for Ver-

mont, he had written to Andrey Avinoff, the celebrated Russian lepidopterist at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, to report his recent discoveries in France and to ask about American lepidoptera. Little did Nabokov know that by the time he left America he would himself be the most famous lepidopterist in the world.

While he enjoyed Vermont, his cousin Nicolas was spending the summer at Wellfleet on Cape Cod, just across the street from Edmund Wilson. Aware of Wilson's keen interest in Russian literature, Nicolas Nabokov, by then a well-known composer, asked his neighbor to assist with the libretto of an opera to be made from Pushkin's "Negro of Peter the Great." He also recalled that cousin Vladimir needed help, and wrote to him in Vermont. At Nicolas's prompting, Vladimir then wrote to Wilson, who suggested they meet in New York.¹⁵

IV

Artists and thinkers of all nationalities and kinds had fled Hitler's Europe for America: Einstein, Mann, Brecht, Huxley, Auden, Stravinsky, Bartok, Chagall. Unlike these well-publicized immigrants, Nabokov slipped into the United States without any fanfare. In his lectures later in the year he could not help a note of regret that while the Germans who had fled Hitler were at once recognized as the true heirs of *their* culture, the Russian émigrés of twenty years earlier, more numerous and more varied, had been overlooked as the active inheritors of Russian culture.¹⁶ Such a strong prejudice against Russian émigrés persisted in the United States, in fact, that Russian émigré literature would be neglected there, even among Russian specialists, until well into the 1960s.¹⁷

After reaching the United States with virtually no money and spending almost four months without landing a job, Nabokov needed an income desperately. Despite his eminence in Russian émigré letters, he had become an utter unknown. The first sign of hope was a cable he received in Vermont from the Tolstoy Foundation, an organization set up by the novelist's daughter Alexandra to help resettle Russian immigrants in America: a job with a New York publisher was being held for him if he came at once. He rushed back to the city. The Tolstoy Foundation secretary "told him to present himself at the main desk of Scribner's Bookshop, which is located below their editorial offices on Fifth Avenue. 'And stand up straight,' she added, 'you'll make a better impression.' At Scribner's he was received by a man named Wreden, whom he had known in Europe,

and who was somewhat nonplussed to see who had been sent over, since the job opening was for a delivery boy on a bicycle."¹⁸ From 9:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. every day he was expected to pack books and convey them to the post office, for sixty-eight dollars a month. He declined: he could not even wrap a parcel, let alone support a family on pay like that.¹⁹

After a week back at 1326 Madison Avenue, the Nabokovs moved in mid-September into a brownstone at 35 West 87th Street, "a dreadful little flat," small and uncomfortable but cheap and close to Central Park.²⁰

As a young father, Nabokov had always tried to open Dmitri's eyes to trees, flowers, animals. He would quiz his son on the names of things, reacting with mock fury when the boy confused terms. But he and Véra had given Dmitri no preparation in speaking English before sending him off to his first American school: with Russia itself off-limits, they knew he would learn to speak Russian properly only if he heard it at home. Throughout the family's years in Germany, France, America, and Switzerland, Russian—liberally sprinkled with English or French—would always remain their language of everyday communication.* Shortly after the family came back from Vermont, six-year-old Dmitri returned from his first day at school and proudly announced that he had learned English.²¹

Nabokov had himself been an English tutor for many years in Europe. Now circumstances drove him once more to the stopgap of language teaching, this time in Russian. It could not have been a worse time to look for pupils. Since Stalin's pact with Hitler had allowed the Germans to overrun France and leave Britain isolated and in peril, Russia and its language were anything but popular. Nevertheless, Elena Mogilat, a teacher of Russian at Columbia, managed to introduce Nabokov to some bright, enthusiastic women, including Hilda Ward, who would later help him translate his memoir "Mademoiselle O" from the French. He taught his class of three for four and a half hours and a princely nine dollars a week.²²

Through other Russians, Nabokov looked for something better. He tried Vernadsky again. He approached Avrahm Yarmolinsky, head of the Slavonic Division of the New York Public Library. He sought the help of Peter Pertzoff at Cornell, who had translated one of his Russian short stories two years before. But nothing turned up, and the Stanford summer-school job for 1941 was still not settled, and

* In the few notes he kept in his diary, though, Nabokov would normally write in English, whether he lived in America or francophone Switzerland.

neither the story Pertzoff had translated nor the novel nor the reminiscences Nabokov had written directly in English had attracted a publisher. When the Society of Friends of Russian Culture staged an evening of Sirin readings on October 12, Nabokov delighted a packed hall, but New York's émigré audience could never support him. He *had* to find a job, or someone who would buy his work in English.²³

On October 8, 1940, he called on Edmund Wilson. Wilson was already the foremost American critic of his time, and had temporarily returned to the *New Republic*, standing in for three months as literary editor in Malcolm Cowley's place. He offered Nabokov books to review, at first on more or less Russian topics (a biography of Diaghilev, a translation of a medieval Georgian epic). Wilson soon wrote of Nabokov to his old mentor at Princeton, Christian Gauss: "I'm amazed at the excellence of the book reviews he's been doing for me. He is a brilliant fellow." A friend of Karpovich also introduced Nabokov to the *New York Sun* and the *New York Times*, and for the next few months, especially in October and November 1940, he reviewed all sorts of work—biography, history, fiction, verse, essays, philosophy—whether with a Russian flavor or not. A review of a John Masefield novel shows some of the bold, free-roaming thought, the dazzling imagery, the verbal grace, and the range that Wilson admired:

What is history? Dreams and dust. How many ways are there for a novelist of dealing with history? Only three. He can court the elusive Muse of verisimilitude by doing his best to unearth and combine all pertinent facts and details; he can frankly indulge in farce or satire by treating the past as a parody of the present; and he can transcend all aspects of time by entrusting a mummy selected at random to the sole care of his genius—provided he has genius. As neither of the first two methods seems to have been adopted by Mr. John Masefield in his new book [*Basilissa, a Tale of the Empress Theodora*], it may be assumed that he relied upon inspiration to transform a certain remote epoch into the everlasting reality of human passions. Unfortunately, his art is not up to the task; and this being so, a problem of appreciation is set: when the magician alone is deceived into seeing his charms working, must the onlookers stare at the stick which has *not* burst into blossom?

They must.²⁴

By dint of tough bargaining with publishers, Wilson had learned to survive in America as a freelance critic and writer without the least intellectual compromise. A champion since the early twenties of unfashionable American writers like Henry James and new figures like Fitzgerald and Hemingway, Wilson had then in *Axel's Castle* become the interpreter of modern European literature—Yeats, Joyce, Eliot,

Valéry, Proust—to a generation of Americans. Convinced, like so many members of the American intelligentsia in the early 1930s, that the depression proved the unworkability of capitalism, he turned toward Marxism and the writing of *To the Finland Station*. There he attempted to show the force of a social explanation of history, which reached a new plateau of power as Lenin turned Marxist historical theory into practice, into the *reshaping* of history. Wilson's intellectual restlessness, his independence of mind, and his honesty led him to see how much was wrong in the Soviet Union when he visited the country in 1935, and well before finishing *To the Finland Station* or meeting Nabokov he had become impatient with any unquestioning allegiance to Marx, let alone to Stalin. His Soviet sojourn had changed him in another way: he discovered Pushkin. Learning the Russian language for Pushkin's sake, he became the first to introduce to a wide American audience the greatest poet since Shakespeare. Now he was eager to probe deeper into Russian literature.

Even before he had read any of Nabokov's Russian fiction—not easy to obtain, and certainly not easy to understand for someone with an uneasy grasp of Russian—Wilson put his hard-won knowledge of the literary marketplace at Nabokov's disposal. He seems to have relied on the excellence of Nabokov's English and the judgment of friends who could vouch for the importance of his Russian oeuvre: Nicolas Nabokov; Harry Levin's wife, Elena, a Sirin fan since as a child she learned by heart the opening of his Russian version of *Alice in Wonderland*; and Roman Grynberg, Nabokov's English-language student in Paris, whose mother and sister had been very kind to Wilson during his time in Moscow.²⁵

If Wilson could help Nabokov into the American publishing world, Nabokov more than anyone else could help Wilson to understand Russian literature and promote its cause. Since Wilson had a tendency to seek out friends because they could further his current enthusiasms, it was fortunate for Nabokov that Wilson's affair with Russian happened to be just at its most ardent. Had they met when the older man's attentions had shifted, as they would between the late 1940s and the 1960s, to Haitian literature, Hebrew, Hungarian, and much else besides, their friendship might never have developed. As it was, at one of their first meetings in New York in the fall of 1940, Wilson urged Nabokov to translate one of Pushkin's masterly miniature verse-dramas. "Your suggestion regarding 'Mozart and Salieri' has worked havoc with me," Nabokov wrote Wilson. "I thought I would toy with the idea—and then suddenly found myself in the very deep waters of English blank verse." After Wilson sent him an advance from the *New Republic* for the translation, Nabokov

wrote back gratefully: "It is really wonderful to be living at last in a country where there is a market for such things."²⁶

At the dinner at Roman Grynberg's where Wilson appears to have suggested translating "Mozart and Salieri," Nabokov was also reintroduced (they had met in Paris) to the writer and translator Max Eastman. In the strongly leftist intellectual climate of America in the 1930s, there were few members of the intelligentsia who had as clear a picture of the horrors of Soviet life—though still short of the bloody truth—as Eastman and Wilson. By presenting himself as the sole foe of fascism, Stalin had successfully manipulated international opinion so that millions of Americans in the 1930s were ready to rally behind the Soviet Union, whatever its flaws. The show trials of 1937–1938 and the Stalin-Hitler pact of 1939 had lost him popular American support, but much of the intelligentsia still accepted everything Stalin did and vilified critics of the Soviet Union.²⁷ For Nabokov, who had recently been asked "You're a Trotskyite, then?" by an American writer whom he had told he was neither for the Soviets nor for any tsar, it came as a relief to talk to Americans who knew something of Soviet realities.²⁸

At the dinner at the Grynbergs' there must have been some discussion of Lenin, for a few days later Wilson sent Nabokov a copy of his new book, *To the Finland Station*, inscribed "to Vladimir Nabokov in the hope that this may make him think better of Lenin." Though disenchanted with Marxism as a creed, and bitterly anti-Stalinist, Wilson still believed in the moral beauty of Lenin as someone who had a vision of a better future for mankind and the courage to bring it about. Wilson seemed to think that Nabokov need only be exposed to Lenin to understand. Nabokov wrote back at length, praising the book as a whole but offering detailed criticism of the portrait of Lenin.* In fact, as he repeatedly tried to point out to Wilson—and to America at large—Russia, for all the brutal stupidities of tsarist rule, had been moving for six decades, albeit in fits and starts, toward increasing political and cultural freedom, until Lenin seized power and turned what had by February 1917 become a democratic republic into a dictatorship that ruthlessly suppressed all opposition. Stalin's secret police were not a betrayal of Lenin's principles but the natural heirs of his apparatus for total state control.²⁹

Though Nabokov was perfectly correct in the lucid criticisms he set before Wilson then and later, Wilson still believed well into the 1950s

* To his friend Karpovich, he also noted that he thought both Hegelians and Marxists were rather more complex than Wilson made them. In the same letter he classified Wilson accurately, if paradoxically, as "a narrow eclectic" (Nabokov to Karpovich, December 10, 1940, Bakhmeteff Archive, Columbia).

that "except for Lenin's democratic reign, Russia had remained unchanged from the Middle Ages to Stalin."³⁰ Because of his Marxist sympathies, he felt confident, he knew Russian history better than Nabokov did. Unaware that in *The Gift* Nabokov had thoroughly researched the origins of Russian radical utilitarianism and in 1933 had even proposed to teach the evolution of Russian Marxism, Wilson simply assumed that Nabokov was uninterested in, and incapable of understanding, social or political issues. Had he ever read the Chernyshevsky biography in *The Gift*, Wilson would have found how much his own analysis of the composition of *Das Kapital* had in common with Nabokov's study of the genesis of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*

Although Nabokov and Wilson shared a passion for Flaubert, Proust, and Joyce, their chief points of contact and friction from first to last would be Pushkin and Russian literature, Lenin and Russian history. But for the moment, their encounters generated intellectual light and personal warmth, not the flame and smoke of battle. For these two opinionated, combative, fiercely independent minds, the brilliance of their frank disagreements was at first just another part of the excitement.

V

Some time in 1940, Mikhail Karpovich introduced Nabokov to Harry Levin. At this point Levin, recently married to a young émigrée, Elena Zarudnaya, was still an untenured young instructor at Harvard and not yet the Harvard Department of Comparative Literature's prize and pride. It was not until the Nabokovs settled in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that they would become close friends with the Levins, but introductions to people like Edmund Wilson and his wife, Mary McCarthy, and the Levins made nonsense of the warning Alexandra Tolstoy had issued to Nabokov: "All Americans are completely uncultured, credulous fools." In 1941, when his friend George Hessen was about to come to the United States, Nabokov's advice was the exact converse: "This is a cultured and exceedingly diverse country. The only thing you must do is deal with genuine Americans and don't get involved with the local Russian emigration." Nabokov was introduced from the start to the best that American intellectual life could offer, and he would make many more American friends in his first years in the United States than he had among non-Russians in twenty years of European exile.³¹

Some of his encounters with the local Russian population justified

his warning to Hessen. An émigré teacher of Russian at Columbia complimented him, as soon as he was introduced, on his magnificent aristocratic pronunciation: "All one hears here are Yids." At an émigré party where Nabokov was the guest of honor, he heard the host himself use the word "Yid." Normally extremely correct in his speech—there is not a single obscenity in his published work—Nabokov responded by swearing deliberately and forcefully. When his host reacted with astonishment, Nabokov replied, "I thought this was the language you used in this house," and promptly left.³²

In America, Nabokov certainly did not ignore old Russian friends from Europe—Nathalie Nabokoff, the businessman and publisher Roman Grynberg, Alexander Kerensky, the painter Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, the writer Mark Aldanov, the former Socialist Revolutionary Vladimir Zenzinov, and the close friends whom he exhorted and helped get into the United States, George Hessen, Anna Feigin, the Marinel sisters. But he made few new friends among Russians. One of those few, the pioneer aviatrix Lucia Davidova, who was a close friend of Stravinsky and Balanchine, pointed out that Nabokov showed no interest in meeting such people. "America is my home now," he later said. "It is my country. The intellectual life suits me better than any other country in the world. I have more friends there, more kindred souls than anywhere."³³

VI

At the end of November 1940, after a long delay caused by financial complications and more than a year after Mark Aldanov had suggested Nabokov take up the offer he himself could not accept, Stanford University at last wired Nabokov to offer him formally a teaching post for the following summer for a salary of \$750. In accepting, Nabokov named four possible courses. Professor Henry Lanz of the Slavic department chose two: Modern Russian Literature, and The Art of Writing, the second to be given in conjunction with the Department of Speech and Drama. Lanz also advised Nabokov that it would be wise to stress "practical playwriting": "In all my advertising notes and pamphlets I strongly emphasize your qualifications as a Russian playwright, for—as you have probably discovered yourself—playwriting in America is the most popular and practical form of literature, and if you will have any number of students in that course they will be from the playwriting class."³⁴

In his apartment on West 87th Street and in the New York Public Library, Nabokov spent the fall, winter, and spring preparing a full set of lectures not just for Stanford but for "this or that Eastern col-

lege blurrily looming ahead" where he might teach Russian literature. He later estimated that he prepared perhaps a hundred lectures, at about twenty pages per hour, or about two thousand pages in all. Never, he wrote to friends, had he had to work so hard.³⁵

Nabokov followed Lanz's advice and thought carefully about dramatic composition. He read a handful of playwriting guides, if only for the satiric treat they offered. A good analogy, he wrote, could be made between "the vulgarian's (Basil Hogarth's) *How to Write Plays*—'the art of poking fun,' 'smart lines,' 'feeling the public's pulse,' 'love scenes'—and a supposed *How to Become a Doctor* consisting of such chapters as 'decorating the reception room,' 'how to welcome the prospective patient,' 'a few easy symptoms,' 'fun with a stethoscope.' " He read and pulled apart a score of recent American plays, including Lillian Hellman's *Children's Hour*, Maxwell Anderson's *Winterset*, Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and especially O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He also reread a dozen plays by Ibsen, whom he liked, but concentrated on *Pillars of Society*, which he found he abhorred. As his ideas on drama bubbled up, he became excited enough to contemplate writing a book on the subject, to be called, perhaps, *In Aleppo Once*, and at the same time he jotted down in a wistful aside: "Oh to write my play about 'Falter'!"³⁶

Lanz's letter urging Nabokov to spotlight playwriting had come at an oddly opportune moment. Just before hearing from Stanford that he had a firm offer for the 1941 summer course, Nabokov had written to Mikhail Chekhov, a former actor in the celebrated Moscow Art Theater and, since his recent arrival in America, director of his own Chekhov Theater Studio in Connecticut. Nabokov proposed an adaptation of *Don Quixote* for the stage, to be carried out in a manner akin to that of his own plays, *The Event* and *The Waltz Invention*. He envisaged an atmosphere tense and alarmed, "like the chaotic condition in which people live"; characters strangely reminiscent of other characters, and characters who seem to appear before Quixote again and again, though they are actually different each time; a person who recurs intermittently as if directing the action; a rhythm that recalls the way we can tell, simply by the intonation of someone talking in the next room, the person being spoken to at the other end of the line. Nabokov's ideas excited Chekhov, and he asked him to draw up a sketch for the play, which Nabokov sent him in January.³⁷

VII

Meanwhile he had been following another old interest. In Berlin, Prague, and London, Nabokov had gone to the entomological

branches of those cities' great museums, but only for more or less isolated visits of inspection. Soon after arriving in New York, he made his way to the American Museum of Natural History and plunged with zest into lepidopterological research, working all fall and winter, unpaid, in the entomological section on the fifth floor, sometimes for whole days at a time. He became friends with William Comstock, who put at Nabokov's disposal all the material he needed to compare with his unidentified catch above Moulinet, and analyzed the butterflies' genitalia, a technique Nabokov himself had not yet learned. Nabokov wrote up the findings on his Moulinet rarity, but hesitated to call it a new species, and also published another article on two species he studied at the museum: his first lepidopterological articles that were more than the travel notes of a gifted collector. In gratitude for the help he received there, Nabokov would later donate some three hundred rare butterflies to the museum.³⁸

At the end of December, Edmund Wilson left the *New Republic*, but arranged for Nabokov to write a survey article on contemporary Soviet literature, which would fit in with his preparations for Stanford. Early in the new year, Nabokov read the Soviet monthly magazines for 1940, "a ghastly and very amusing task." No longer having the same warm feeling toward the *New Republic* now that Wilson had gone, Nabokov sent his devastating critique to Klaus Mann's ambitious new periodical *Decision*, with which Wilson had also put him in touch. Even straight quotation was damning enough—curiously similar comments by Lenin and the Nazi ideologist Alfred Rosenberg on the "freedom" the artist could have by following the party line, or this precept from a Soviet reviewer to Soviet writers: "A novelist ought not to indulge in the description of misty or cloudy landscape; the Soviet countryside must be shown to be gay and sunny."³⁹

As a boy, Nabokov had stopped in Berlin for three months to have his teeth attended to by an American dentist. Now in January 1941, his teeth still a problem, Nabokov once again took advantage of America's dental technology: "Although operation after operation passes painlessly—except for the needle sinking into the tight, gleaming gum—and it is even pleasant to look at the monster that has been extracted, sometimes with an abscess hanging at the root at big as a red candy cherry, the sensations that follow are awful. . . . Most of the extractions have been made, and I think I'll be able to smile for the first time next week." In fact it would be another four months before all eight teeth were out and new dentures were in place. To pay for such things as dentistry and a Manhattan apartment, Véra Nabokov managed to find an excellent secretarial job at *France Forever*, but she was there only a short while before becoming

seriously ill. There was even concern that the family might not be able after all to travel to Stanford.⁴⁰

VIII

Early in February, Nabokov delivered his first American college lecture, a guest lecture—a great success—at Wells College, near Cornell, where his cousin Nicolas was teaching music. In New York he had established himself, with the help of Mikhail Karpovich, on the lecture-tour roster of the Institute of International Education. Through the Institute and Prof. Agnes Perkins of the Department of English Literature at Wellesley College, Nabokov was offered two weeks of lectures at Wellesley, beginning on March 15, for \$250. The college had been attracted, Nabokov recalled, by the fact that he had translated *Alice in Wonderland* into Russian.⁴¹

After New York, Nabokov found the oaky calm of New England soothing, and the campus of Wellesley, a private women's college just outside Boston, reminded him in patches and whiffs of Trinity College, Cambridge. During his stay at Claflin Hall, Nabokov was hosted by Agnes Perkins, and by Amy Kelly of the Department of English Composition, later to become known as the author of a best-selling biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine.⁴²

Since Wellesley had no Russian department, Nabokov lectured to English classes—although anyone could attend—on Russian literature: "The Technique of the Russian Novel," "The Short Stories of Gorky and Chekhov," "The Proletarian Novel," "The Soviet Drama," "The Soviet Short Story." He thundered against Gorky and Hemingway. He spoke up for the novelists of the neglected Russian emigration, Bunin, Aldanov—and Sirin. Though Soviet literature, he declared, was a provincial courtyard—and he cited liberally to prove his point—émigré literature had continued the public highway of Russian culture. And he again emphasized as he had in his *Decision* article the fundamental similarity of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, now sharing the spoils of Eastern Europe.⁴³

Nabokov's lectures were such a "purring success" that he was paid a bonus, and he was made much of at soirees, banquets, and meetings. By the time he left, moves were already afoot to have him at Wellesley for much longer. He welcomed the prospect: before quitting the campus he wrote to Aldanov that he doubted whether Europe had more attractive universities.⁴⁴

While in Boston, Nabokov had lunch with another contact he owed to Edmund Wilson, Edward Weeks, editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Weeks recalls the strong impression Nabokov's physical appearance made on him then and over the next year or so when they would meet at the downstairs café at the Ritz: "He would come in in a shabby tweed coat, trousers bulging at the knee, but be quite the most distinguished man in the room, with his perfectly beautiful hazel eyes, his fine brown hair, the *élan*, the spark. . . . He just had to walk into the room and the girls looked around—the clothes didn't make any difference. He had a way of carrying himself, a *joie* in his eyes, a zest." After three years of rejections from English-language publishers, Nabokov was surprised at the way Weeks exulted over the translation of "Cloud, Castle, Lake": "We are enchanted, . . . this is genius, . . . this is what we have been looking for, . . . we want to print it at once—give us more." Over the next few years the *Atlantic* would be the outlet for nearly a dozen Nabokov stories and poems.⁴⁵

On the way back to New York at the end of March, Nabokov stopped in Ridgefield, Connecticut, to see Mikhail Chekhov. Their ideas for adapting *Don Quixote* no longer coincided (Chekhov wanted a Christian or rather an anthroposophical apotheosis at the end), and the project was called off.⁴⁶ From Ridgefield, Nabokov traveled on a little further to Stamford to spend a night with Edmund Wilson and Wilson's third wife, Mary McCarthy.

Wilson and Nabokov had seen each other several times over the past few months, but it was in Stamford that their keen interest in each other turned into warm friendship. The lean, intense Nabokov, with his full-voweled Russian version of a Cambridge accent, and short, plump, puffy-faced Wilson, with his loud, curiously high-pitched voice, went line by line through the proofs of Nabokov's translation of "Mozart and Salieri." In the glow of their collaboration, Nabokov for once was amenable to emendations, even grateful for them. The two men could not agree on the subject of Russian prosody, a difference that would gradually become tiresome and vexing to them both when repeated on and off for the next twenty-five years, but for the moment they overwhelmed and exhilarated each other with their energy.⁴⁷

Mary McCarthy, then a twenty-eight-year-old former *Partisan Review* editor just starting to write her first fiction, watched them with delight. In her words, "they had an absolute ball together. Edmund was always in a state of *joy* when Vladimir appeared; he *loved* him." As Clarence Brown would remark in a review of *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, "both of them well past the midpoint of life, formed the sort of friendship that is normally possible only in youth." Wilson's young son Reuel heard the name "Volodya," but could say it only as "Gardenia." Nabokov thought the name enchanting; Wilson de-

clared with mock grandeur, "you're the gardenia in the buttonhole of Russian literature." Out on a long stroll together, Wilson asked Nabokov whether or not he believed in God. "Do you?" countered Nabokov. "What a strange question!" muttered Wilson, and fell silent.⁴⁸

IX

Though Nabokov had failed to convince Mikhail Chekhov that his *Don Quixote* adaptation was stageworthy, his similarly frenetic *The Event* had its American premiere on April 4, 1941, at the Heckscher Theater in New York. G. S. Ermolov directed and played Troshcheikin; the sets were by Nabokov's friend Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, who had designed sets for Meyerhold, Diaghilev, and Stanislavsky (he was Stanislavsky's favorite designer), and in New York would do the same for the Metropolitan Opera. Nabokov, who had been in Menton when the play premiered in Paris, beamed with pleasure to see it onstage. For decades to come one of the few decorations the Nabokovs would have on their wall—as a rule they entirely neglected their domestic landscape—was a blue-and-white Delftware plate, complete with crack, that Dobuzhinsky had painted on cardboard as a prop for the play.⁴⁹

During April, Nabokov began to translate Russian poetry for his Stanford course. At this stage he translated rhyme for rhyme, preserving an unusual degree of accuracy, although with the inevitable slight equivocation from time to time for the sake of rhyme. The absolutist fidelity and ungainliness of his *Eugene Onegin*, upon which Wilson was to pour such scorn, were still more than a decade away, and for the moment Wilson rated one of the first two short Pushkin lyrics Nabokov sent him as "the best Pushkin translation and one of the best translations of poetry of any kind I ever saw."⁵⁰ Over the next months Nabokov translated more Pushkin and Lermontov and Tyutchev.

In the middle of May, Nabokov heard from Wellesley College that it had formally decided to offer him a one-year appointment for the coming year. Though he was to give a few public lectures on comparative literature, to see classes from time to time, and perhaps to read from some of his stories and novels, Agnes Perkins emphasized that almost all his time was to be kept for writing, since the position was intended to be virtually a writer-in-residence post.⁵¹ When Nabokov finished at Stanford, there would be something congenial waiting for him back East.

X

Stanford University would not pay Nabokov any traveling expenses. When one of his Russian-language pupils, Dorothy Leuthold, heard this, she offered to drive the family out West: she had a new car and wanted to test her driving, she would have some exposure to Russian en route, and besides, it would be fun. On May 26 they set out from New York, Nabokov equipped with his four-volume Dahl dictionary, his manuscripts, and his butterfly net.⁵²

Nabokov had always cherished exploration as one of his most passionate dreams (see *The Pole*, "Terra Incognita," *The Gift*), and he would have relished Elizabeth Hardwick's comment on *Lolita* after his death: "It is rather in the mood of Marco Polo in China that he meets the (to us) exhausted artifacts of the American scene." His 1941 trip westward was his first venture into the territory of *Lolita*'s motel America: Hotel General Shelby, Maple Shade Cottage, Wonderland Motor Courts, El Rey Courts, Bright Angel Lodge, Mission Court. Nabokov looked around him with an artist's and a scientist's eye, writing with rapture to Dobuzhinsky, his old drawing master, of the changing hues and forms of the landscape, and capturing whatever lepidoptera he could.⁵³

They traveled slowly through the Appalachians. As the others sat over their thermos and sandwiches at roadside tables, Nabokov would stalk off, net in hand. They drove through Tennessee and Arkansas, and as he crossed the Mississippi, Nabokov recalled not Mark Twain but Chateaubriand's verdant America. He caught moths at a gas station between Dallas and Fort Worth. Amid the sagebrush of Arizona and New Mexico deserts, he pursued butterflies he had known only in guidebooks or museum trays. In Arizona he was followed for five miles by a horse, "a total stranger." Once he found himself surrounded by coyotes, "unusually likeable, a mother and her pups." And in New Mexico he was nearly arrested for painting a farmer's trees with sugar to attract a certain kind of moth.⁵⁴

On the night of June 7, the travelers stopped on the south rim of the Grand Canyon in the painted log cabins of Bright Angel Lodge. As an "accredited representative of the American Museum of Natural History," Nabokov was issued a permit to collect specimens in Grand Canyon National Park. On June 9, a bright cold morning after snow and rain, he walked down the slushy mule track of Bright Angel Trail with Dorothy Leuthold. A few minutes down the trail, her foot kicked up a mid-sized brown butterfly, fluttering weakly in the cold. Nabokov saw at once that it seemed to belong to a still undescribed species of *Neonympha*. He netted it, and then another, and returned

proudly to the rim—where Véra and Dmitri had sheltered in the car for warmth—only to find that right beside the car Véra had herself caught two specimens, sluggish with the cold, with nothing but her fingers.⁵⁵

In 1942, Nabokov published a paper on the butterfly and related species.⁵⁶ He named his find, the first new species he had discovered, the fulfillment of his most passionate childhood dream, *Neonympha dorothea*, in honor of the woman who had not only kicked up the butterfly but had made it possible for his first crossing of the United States to be an adventure of discovery rather than four days rocking in a train.

XI

When the group reached Palo Alto on June 14, Dorothy Leuthold headed back eastward. The Nabokovs rented a neat little house, a trim Riviera villa, at 230 Sequoia Avenue, just across El Camino Real from the Stanford campus: a sequoia in their own front garden, but no phone and no car.⁵⁷

In the cool blue Palo Alto mornings Nabokov would walk through Stanford's dusty eucalyptus groves to his office and classroom in the Quadrangle, all tan sandstone and rounded arches beneath roofs of Mediterranean tiles. His two courses began on June 24: Modern Russian Literature (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday at 9:00, with only two students enrolled, according to the Stanford register) and The Art of Writing (Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday at 11:00, four students).⁵⁸

Lean, muscled, tanned, standing before his students in Karpovich's cut-down suit, Nabokov seemed "a man with more energy than he could contain" and read his lectures with such sustained intensity that he was oblivious to the froth and spittle forming on his lips.⁵⁹ The surviving text of these Stanford lectures—not to be confused with the published Cornell lectures—explains not only the intensity of Nabokov's manner but the principles of all his criticism.

Always a hard worker, he had prepared thoroughly for class. For the playwriting on which he seems to have concentrated with his creative writing students, he read plays and playwriting guides not widely but energetically and with complete independence of mind. Knowing what he was looking for, he reacted quickly to what he read, writing with such speed that he misspelled words and over-

looked grammar but could still express his strong opinions forcefully even in this headlong prose.

Lanz could not have made the suggestion that Nabokov focus on *practical* playwriting to anyone less likely to accept it. Nabokov stressed to his students that "the prime object of a playwright ought to be not to write a successful play but an immortal one." He analyzed the plays he had read not for suggestions to follow but only to show what to avoid: the automatic conventions incompatible with dramatic truth, the tight shackles of determinism that hobble tragedy, the lines of least resistance in exposition and resolution, the fatal desire to pander to the audience.

Nabokov's dismissals of highly regarded writers are notorious. That they are not a writer's envy but the expression of his passion for the possibilities of his art becomes clear in these lectures:

I must apologize. . . . I so deeply love good literature and hate so bitterly bad literature that my expressions may be stronger than they ought to be.

I feel much too deeply about permanent values not to apply to modern plays those lofty and imperishable standards which playwrights of genius have observed.

He explained again and again that he was not out to attack authors but to defend and extend literary art:

What merely interests me is to find the best illustrations of this or that aspect of the technique of writing and just as in science it is not making fun of a creature to note the whims or blunders or the conventional repetitions of Nature in the evolutionary process, so my choice of this or that author is not necessarily the fiercest indictment of him which the list of his fallacies may seem.

What other teacher would tell a group of aspiring writers that for all his reverence for Shakespeare and Chekhov, even these great masters had not done quite enough? In a note to himself, Nabokov summed up his strategy:

My fundamental standpoint: 1a) drama exists, all the ingredients of a perfect play exist, but this perfect play (though there exist perfect novels, short stories, poems, essays) has not been produced yet neither by Shakespeare nor by Chekhov. It can be imagined and one day it will be written—either by an Anglo-Saxon or a Russian. 1b) exploding the myth of the average audience. 2) the examination of the conventions and ideas

which hamper the possibility of such a play being written—and staged.*
 3) rally of positive forces already known, suggestions of method and new lines based on them.

Nabokov thought that nothing could be worse than the contention that the audience was everything in a play, that the ideal dramatist was the one endowed with an intuition for “what the public wants.” He detested the “abject grovelling at the feet of an imaginary audience of nincompoops.” “The Theatre is *not* a ‘function of the crowd’ for the simple reason that a crowd is composed of individuals.” “I maintain that the public’s judgement is much more intelligent than the management thinks.”

A low opinion of the audience necessitated certain standard modes of exposition, certain necessary signals of future developments, a false commitment to rising action and the absolute finality of the last curtain—all of which destroyed the splendid fluidity and surprise of life and the fact that situations often simply fizzle out. What Nabokov hoped for instead from drama was “the selective and harmonious intensification of the loose patterns of chance and destiny, character and action, thought and emotion, existing in the reality of human life,” “a certain unique pattern of life in which the sorrows and passions of a particular man will follow the rules of his own individuality, not the rules of the theatre as we know them.”⁶⁰

Nabokov lectured also on poetry, the short story, the novel, and the need for an individual style. The published lecture “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” one of the few pieces that survive from his creative writing course, ends with the same message as his playwriting lectures: the need to follow the special rules of the self while the crowd around “is being driven by some common impulse to some common goal.” Just when an author sits down to write, “the monster of grim commonsense” will lumber up the steps “to whine that the book is not for the general public, that the book will never never—And right then, just before it blurts out the word *s, e, double-l*, false commonsense must be shot dead.”⁶¹ In its dazzling, turbulent imagery, the lecture is an exhilarating performance, a *demonstration* of a marvelous writer at work, and at the furthest remove possible

* Nabokov notes in his Russian lectures that Chekhov, “though he almost managed to create a new and better kind of drama, was cunningly caught in his own snares. I have the definite impression that he would not have been caught by these conventions—by the very conventions he thought he had broken—if he had known a little more of the numerous forms they take. . . . he had not studied the art of drama completely enough, had not studied a sufficient number of plays, was not critical enough about certain technical aspects of his medium”—a judgment that speaks volumes about Nabokov’s own study of the art of fiction (*Lectures on Russian Literature*, 291).

from a collection of helpful hints or a do-it-yourselfer's guide. Nabokov would also from time to time read from his fiction—as if the lectures did not already bear his own special stamp.⁶²

One student summed up the Art of Writing course:

I don't recall taking any notes in that class. It would have been rather like scribbling notes when Michelangelo talked about how he had designed and painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. In any event, I don't recall that he lectured in any conventional sense of the term. He shared with us his creative activity and experience. Never was there richer fare in any course taught on a college campus, but it was as impossible to reduce to notes as to convert a Rolls-Royce into tin cans with a tack hammer.⁶³

Nabokov's methods seem to have worked.

However absolute Nabokov may have been in his demands on great writers, he did not expect to find the savior of modern drama right there in his class. He might ask for nothing less than diamonds, but he was ready to concede that coal was carbon too. He was "a most undemanding teacher at Stanford and would be highly appreciative of anything even vaguely resembling acceptable prose. Only barbarous writing would occasionally provoke him to mild ridicule, though he would frequently ask the class for help when he could not understand what someone was trying to do in an assignment."⁶⁴

According to the Stanford bulletin, Nabokov's Modern Russian Literature course covered the "history of Russian literature from 1905 to our times, with survey of the revolutionary movement in earlier Russian literature." In fact, Nabokov seems to have ignored this rubric, for although over the spring he had prepared material on Soviet literature, he evidently taught much from the nineteenth century: he mentions to Wilson having to bestir himself from his sunny deck chair to "talk about Russian versification or the way Gogol used the word '*dazhe*' in '*Shinel*'" ("The Overcoat"). Since he found the existing translations of Russian classics not, as Pushkin called them, the post-horses of civilization but "the wild asses of wild ignorance," he had to translate Pushkin and Gogol as he went along—"A Feast During the Plague," "The Overcoat"—until his hand ached.⁶⁵

One constant theme whenever Nabokov lectured on Russian literature was the censorship from the right under the tsars and the censorship from the left under the radicals of the 1840s and 1860s and their despotic descendants in the Soviet Union. As in the creative writing course, where he exhorted his students to defy the American tyranny of the marketplace, Nabokov made his lectures a plea for the right of artists to accept no dictates but their own artistic consciences.

In a climate he compared to Pushkin's prose, cloudless but not hot, Nabokov read and worked in the sun, sitting in his swim shorts on the billiard-table lawn at the back of the house. On free days he would head to the yellow hills of Los Altos for butterflies, and there met his first rattlesnake.⁶⁶

Evenings were often taken up with a busy round of parties, all very formal and "genteel"—Véra Nabokov remembers Stanford as much more formal than Wellesley. (At one party, though, Nabokov introduced a different note when he had to be given a remedy for poison ivy after the day's chase.) Among those the Nabokovs liked to meet socially were Yvor Winters and Henry Lanz and their wives. Lanz, the head of Nabokov's department at Stanford, was a Russianized Finn with whom Nabokov often played chess and whom he found delicate, cultured, and talented. He also discovered another side to him: Lanz was a nympholept, and would drive off on the weekends, neat and dapper in his blazer, to orgiastic parties with nymphets.⁶⁷

Back in January, Edmund Wilson and Harry Levin had both passed Nabokov's name to James Laughlin, the wealthy young scion of a steel family who had just set up the publishing firm of New Directions to launch works of high literary and low commercial value. Nabokov had sent Laughlin the manuscript of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which was read and recommended by Delmore Schwartz.* In July, Laughlin accepted the book, much to its author's surprise. After three years of rejections, Nabokov had no choice but to accept the low advance of \$150. A few days later Laughlin came up to see him from a visit to Los Angeles and sought an option on his next three books.⁶⁸

With term, exams, and marking over by the first week of September, the Nabokovs' friends Bertrand and Lisbet Thompson, now living in San Francisco, came to pick them up and drive them for ten days around Yosemite National Park. This time too, of course, Nabokov was armed with a permit to catch butterflies for the American Museum of Natural History. Once he was so intent on the chase that he stepped on a slumbering bear.⁶⁹

XII

Before Nabokov had left for California, Edmund Wilson, who had just finished a study of Californian writers, had warned his friend against succumbing to Hollywood commercialism and the temptation

* For an account of the composition of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov's first major work in English, written in 1938, before he abandoned Russian, and for a description and analysis of the novel, see *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, pp. 494–502.

to bask idly in the Californian sun. Nabokov knew he had nothing to fear from either, and just before heading east again, he lectured in the Slavic department at Berkeley—at that time headed by Alexander Kaun, the Sirin fan he had met in Paris in 1932—in the hope that his performance would be remembered should a vacancy arise.⁷⁰

On September 11 the Nabokovs left Palo Alto and traveled by train direct to New York and Wellesley.⁷¹ By the time he returned across America, Nabokov was no longer Sirin, a writer confined to the isolation ward of an émigré subculture, but a European intellectual who had found refuge in American universities—and what could be more American than that? From the smiling scenes of his first morning in Manhattan, his first year here had set the pattern for his future as an American. He would settle in the East, but travel through the West summer after summer. He would revel in the intellectual excitement of America. He would study and chase butterflies more zealously than he had ever done, and his teaching and translating and lepidoptera would leave him very little time for his muse. After some difficulties, his English works and even his Russian stories would find a publisher, but there would be no chance for any more of his Russian novels—the vast bulk of his creative output to date—to be published in English until *Lolita* brought him a second fame and allowed him to leave the refuge of academic America.



Visiting Lecturer: Wellesley and Cambridge, 1941–1942

The *déménagement* from my palatial Russian to the narrow quarters of
my English was like moving from one darkened house
to another on a starless night during a strike
of candlemakers and torchbearers.

—Unpublished note, Nabokov archives

I

NABOKOV'S Wellesley College colleague, the writer Sylvia Berkman, maintains that although she has befriended writers as well known as Robert Frost, she has never met anyone else who seemed to constitute, as Nabokov did, a special kind of his own, an autonomous genus to which not a single other person belonged.¹ His first appointment at Wellesley for 1941–1942 acknowledged his uniqueness by devising a position especially for him: Resident Lecturer in Comparative Literature.

Apart from its being only a one-year appointment, this post suited Nabokov far better than any university position he later held. Since Wellesley had neither a Russian nor a comparative literature department, he was quite on his own. He had been invited to Wellesley, on the strength of his brilliant guest lectures in March, simply to be an inspiration to the college in his role as writer, and he was to be left nearly all his time to do just that: to write. His only obligations were to deliver six public lectures, "possibly on such a theme as 'The Great Russian Writers and Their Importance and Influence on European Culture,'" and a small number of lectures to classes in modern literature departments.² The "Resident" in his title was seriously meant: he had to live in Wellesley and was expected to participate in the college's extracurricular life, dining once a week or so at one or another of the various college houses. For all this, he would be well paid: \$3,000, an associate professor's salary.

On their return from California the Nabokovs found a place to rent a few minutes' walk from campus on a quiet street in the quiet village of Wellesley: a small but comfortable apartment tucked under the gambrel roof of a large clapboard house at 19 Appleby Road. By 1944, when he formally became part of the teaching staff, Nabokov would have an apartment in Cambridge and would commute from there to Wellesley only on the afternoons of his classes, so that he had little contact with anyone except his students. Things were quite different in this first year, when he was highly visible in and around Wellesley. Colleagues who would soon become friends lived nearby: Agnes Perkins and Amy Kelly, both near retirement age, who had hosted him in March; a youngish couple, Wilma and Charles Kerby-Miller, also both of the English department; and Andrée Bruel of French.

Nabokov liked Wellesley from the start, not least for its appreciation of him. He would later praise the purity of its scholarship, less marred by academic jockeying for prestige and position than neighboring Harvard. He considered the college's interest in the welfare of its students as typical of American kindness as the open-stack system of its library was of American openness. At first, after his recent "Western orgies," he found it "pathetically dull to watch the good old eastern combination of butterflies on the college lawns," but he also felt more at home in New England than he had "in fair but somehow unreal California, among those blond hills," and he came to enjoy the winding walks through Wellesley's wooded campus, the ivy-twined trees, the innumerable flowers, and gray Lake Waban.³

Early in the fall semester, each Wednesday for the first three weeks of October, Nabokov delivered a public lecture in Pendleton Hall to a large audience of staff and students. His opening lecture, "Pushkin as a West European Writer," introduced Pushkin as an exile in his own country, not only subject to the censorship of the tsar but condemned to "a condition of permanent exile which is familiar to all writers of genius but with great Russian writers has always been an almost natural state." His second lecture, "Lermontov as a West European Writer," focused especially on the short lyric "The Dream." The third, "Gogol as a West European Writer," celebrated the irrational magic of "The Overcoat" and Gogol's visual sense that transcended "the hackneyed combinations of blind noun and dog-like adjective that Europe had inherited from the ancients."⁴

Nabokov also gave guest lectures in the Department of English Composition and in the modern literature departments, English, French, Spanish, and Italian. To Spanish students, for instance, he spoke of the use Russian writers had made of Spain: *The Stone Guest*, Pushkin's brilliant version of the Don Juan story; and the Russian

intelligentsia's identification with Don Quixote as its members tilted at the windmills of tsarism.⁵

Nabokov and his wife often dined with the Wellesley students in college dormitories or in clubs.⁶ His bold opinions and his wide-ranging interests fascinated his young listeners, and he basked in their admiration. The young women—plaid skirts, bobby socks, buttoned sweaters with sleeves pushed up—thought him charming, handsome, and by the standards of well-to-do Wellesley, romantically poor.

II

On his arrival in Wellesley, Nabokov began to write a major article on natural mimicry, with "furious refutations of 'natural selection' and 'the struggle for life.'" It was a theme that had inspired him since childhood. While accepting the fact of evolution, Nabokov thought the Darwinian account of its mechanisms in error:* he could not accept that the undirected randomness of natural selection would ever explain the elaborateness of nature's designs, especially in the most complex cases of mimicry where the design appears to exceed any predator's powers of apprehension. Nabokov sensed something artistic and deceptive in nature, as if its ornate patterns had been deliberately hidden to be rediscovered by the eyes of human intelligence. Although he had completed the paper by the following spring, it was never published and nothing survives except a fragment embedded in *Speak, Memory*.⁷

Nabokov's ideas on mimicry, so fundamental to his whole sense of life, shade rapidly from naturalists' lore into metaphysical speculation. In other respects, his lepidoptery gave off the unmistakable naphthalene scent of the laboratory.

Shortly after settling in Wellesley, he traveled the sixteen miles to Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology to check his Grand Canyon catches against the M.C.Z.'s holdings. He discovered right away that most of the butterflies of the Old World in the Weeks collection were badly arranged and poorly housed in glassless trays that offered no protection from dust and museum mites. He called on Nathaniel

* At that time, his position was not so unusual as it may seem now. Among professional biologists it was only in the decade 1937–1947 that what Julian Huxley called "the evolutionary synthesis" itself evolved, and settled the differences between naturalists and geneticists that had impeded widespread acceptance, not of evolution per se, but of Darwin's own explanations of the phenomena. See Ernst Mayr, *The Growth of Biological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 566–68.

Banks, Harvard's head of entomology, and volunteered to set the collection in order. Banks, who had heard from his friend William Comstock at the American Museum of Natural History that Nabokov would call, had open before him on his desk Nabokov's 1920 article "A Few Notes on Crimean Lepidoptera"—a propitious beginning.⁸

Thomas Barbour, the director of the M.C.Z., located some empty glass trays for Nabokov and ordered more, and told him that they would be delighted if he wished to come and arrange the collection in his spare time. It was a very casual offer, and of course he would work without pay, but Nabokov was thrilled to have access to the collection. From October 1941 he would take the tedious subway-and-train or bus-and-streetcar journey at least once a week to the M.C.Z. There, in room 402, with its great cabinets of sliding trays housing rows of neatly pinned and labeled butterflies, moths, and skippers, he was installed at a long bench at the east-facing windows. Within a year that bench would become almost his permanent daytime home.⁹

Nabokov remembered Barbour, the museum's director but not an entomologist, as a genial fellow who liked his *Atlantic* stories, and he always felt grateful for Barbour's sympathy and generosity in allowing him to indulge in research. At the other end of the M.C.Z. hierarchy was a young student volunteer named Kenneth Christiansen, who recalled Nabokov as the most brilliant conversationalist among the many fascinating talkers at the museum, the one people went to if they felt like talk and he was not too busy. Hearing of the boy's interest in dragonflies, Nabokov told him all about them and explained to him the complexities of taxonomy and classification.¹⁰

Nabokov was not a specialist in the Satyrids, the family to which his Grand Canyon butterfly belonged, but he sat down in the laboratory and worked out how to reclassify his catch. Assembling from the M.C.Z. and other museums around the country a hundred specimens all labeled as the one species, *henshawi* Edwards, he established that some in fact belonged to a second species, his new *dorothea*, and others to a third, *pyracmon*, not previously thought to occur in North America. His Grand Canyon specimens were quite distinct and woke people up: collectors began to amass long series of the butterflies, and confirmed the differences he had discerned.¹¹

III

As Nabokov adjusted to the M.C.Z., his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, approached publication. Still apprehensive

that his English might betray him, Nabokov asked Agnes Perkins to help him read the galleys. Edmund Wilson also saw the proofs and found the novel "absolutely enchanting. It's amazing that you should write such fine English prose and not sound like any other English writer. . . . It is all on a high *poetic* level, and you have succeeded in being a first-rate poet in English. It has delighted and stimulated me more than any new book I have read since I don't know what."¹² Nevertheless, Wilson's competitive edge made him feel obliged to cavil, as he invariably would, at minor verbal quirks, and Nabokov replied, as *he* invariably would, in a letter that pointedly redeployed the supposedly defective constructions.

Already, in late October 1941, Nabokov had dreamed up a new English novel. But as he told Aldanov this, he added that he was longing for Russian and Russia. He was still very much a Russian writer and to relinquish his language was agony. In almost all his literary work over the next few years he would either translate from or write about other Russian writers, or write about Russian subjects. He sent Aldanov "Ultima Thule"—the last chapter of his uncompleted novel *Solus Rex*, the last fiction he would ever write in Russian, and penned in any case before he left Europe—for the first issue of *Novyy zhurnal*. He sent his Lermontov lecture to the English-language *Russian Review*, which had sprung up in the sudden shower of sympathy for Russia after Hitler's invasion in June 1941 had driven the Soviet Union into the allied camp. His first new work after arriving at Wellesley was to translate three poems by Vladislav Khodasevich, a writer like himself who deserved a fame denied him as an émigré. Half a century later these brilliant translations are still the best evidence an English-language reader can have of Khodasevich's genius.¹³ Nabokov also wrote his own first English poem since his youth, a lament for the loss of his "Softest of Tongues":

To all these things I've said the fatal word [*proshchai*, farewell]
 using a tongue I had so tuned and tamed
 that—like some ancient sonneteer—I heard
 its echoes by posterity acclaimed.
 But now thou too must go; just here we part,
 softest of tongues, my true one, all my own. . . .
 And I am left to grope for heart and art
 and start anew with clumsy tools of stone.¹⁴

Nabokov traveled alone to Wellfleet to spend Thanksgiving with the Wilsons. A much better poem resulted from his encounter there with the latest American appliances: "The Refrigerator Awakes" turns a humdrum machine humming in the darkness into a doorway

to the wonders of night and the romance of polar exploration.¹⁵ The *New Yorker*, the best-paying of American magazines, at once accepted the piece, the first of several Nabokov poems it would publish over the next few years.

Wilson, who a couple of months later would tell a publishing acquaintance that Nabokov was the most brilliant man he had ever met and that he would someday write one of the great contemporary novels, wrote a superb blurb for *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.¹⁶ Almost three years after Nabokov completed it, the novel was at last published on December 18, 1941. Reviews fell into three categories—rapturous, confused, or hostile, with the first two predominating. Some were quite perceptive: the *Baltimore Sun* identified the book's real theme as "the depths and mysteries of the individuality of the spirit"; the *New York Herald Tribune* considered it an attempt not merely to define "the total unknowableness of any individual but, still more, to intimate the bewitched loneliness of each single human being . . . a little masterpiece of cerebration and execution."¹⁷ But because the novel appeared less than two weeks after Pearl Harbor, it was an immediate flop with the public. Wilson's blurb helped catch the attention of bright young readers—Howard Nemerov, John Wain, Flannery O'Connor, Herbert Gold—for whom during the course of the 1940s the book became a prized private classic. For Nabokov that was far too little, far too late.

IV

Even before Pearl Harbor, the war had been changing Wellesley. Heat-conservation measures and marathon knitting sessions on behalf of servicemen and refugees were now complemented by air-raid drills and war courses in first aid, home nursing, and canteen cookery. In the wider world, a wave of pro-Soviet enthusiasm was rising toward a crest of hysteria as Germany penetrated deep into Russia.

Nabokov appears to have been prompted to write his next novel, eventually to be called *Bend Sinister*, as his private contribution to the war effort: an attempt to show that Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia represented fundamentally the same brutish vulgarity inimical to everything most vulnerable and most valuable in human life. He was deeply engrossed in writing the first chapters of the novel—he had not yet abandoned the practice of writing in sequence, chapter by chapter—in December and January, and optimistically wrote to James Laughlin: "It will be ready for you in three or four months."¹⁸

Early in February he spoke at Wellesley in a panel discussion or-

ganized by the college's Emergency Service Committee. A year before at Wellesley, when Hitler and Stalin had been devouring Eastern Europe together, Nabokov had publicly equated Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Now, unable to praise Stalin's Russia but also unable to condemn a country bearing the brunt of a German attack, he stressed the kinship between American and English democracy and the short-lived democracy of old Russia:

A Russian democrat of the old days, and an American or an English one, despite the differences in forms of government in their respective countries, could meet with perfect ease on a common and natural basis. . . .

Democracy is humanity at its best, not because we happen to think that a republic is better than a king and a king is better than nothing and nothing is better than a dictator, but because it is the natural condition of every man ever since the human mind became conscious not only of the world but of itself. Morally, democracy is invincible. Physically, that side will win which has the better guns. Of faith and pride, both sides have plenty. That *our* faith and *our* pride are of a totally different order cannot concern an enemy who believes in shedding blood and is proud of its own.¹⁹

V

At the beginning of the second semester, Nabokov gave his second trio of public lectures: on Turgenev's aquarelle style and Tolstoy's unique knack for making the time of imagined events coincide somehow with the reader's time; on the poetry of Tyutchev; and on Chekhov's pathos and his magical interweaving of details seemingly picked at random. He also lectured to Italian students on Leonardo, to English students on the tragedy of tragedy, to zoology students on the theory and practice of mimicry. His name cropped up often in the *Wellesley College News*. One student interviewed him about his aesthetic philosophy. "There is no such thing as art," he told her: "there are artists, but they are individuals with different forms of expression." After listening to his gloomy aspersions on the conventionality of "war art," the reporter asked if he thought art might die out altogether. He laughed in astonishment: "Art is in its infancy!"²⁰

In late March he composed perhaps his finest piece of Russian verse, the long poem "Slava" ("Fame").²¹ In this haunting, troubling poem, a vague figure who seems all the more eerie and sinister for remaining unspecifiable tries to load the poet with a sense of remorse for having broken with his native land and therefore—now that the

emigration is over—with readers everywhere. So far the poem is a bleak reversal of the *exegi monumentum* tradition: you have tried to raise a poetic monument, but no one will ever see it; unlike Pushkin, you are not part of Russia, or famous, and never will be; can your life be anything but a joke? But at last the poet laughs despair away and declares that it is neither fame nor readers that matter, but a special vision that he carries within and that *some* reader might intuit with a shiver:

That main secret tra-tá-ta tra-tá-ta tra-tá—
 and I must not be overexplicit;
 this is why I find laughable the empty dream
 about readers, and body, and glory.

 . . . one day while disrupting the strata of sense
 and descending deep down to my wellspring
 I saw mirrored, besides my own self and the world,
 something else, something else, something else.

In later years Nabokov often lamented the anguish of having to abandon his native language in the early 1940s when his Russian muse was so evidently glowing with health: "My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English." For a long time he would feel his new language of composition "a stiffish, artificial thing, which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop. An old Rolls-Royce is not always preferable to a plain Jeep." The one compensation he found for restricting his prose to English was the handful of long Russian poems he wrote in the early 1940s, which, he rightly thought, "improve rather oddly in urgency and concentration" upon all his previous Russian verse.²²

The day after Nabokov's final public lecture at Wellesley, the departments of Italian, French, Spanish, and German wrote to Ella Keats Whiting, Dean of Instruction, to urge his reappointment: "Through his originality, his creative ability, his keenly critical mind, his stimulating presence and his brilliant use of the English language he has made a definite place for himself at Wellesley College."²³ A powerful alumna sent one hundred dollars to the President's Fund, hoping that it might help toward retaining Nabokov:

I heard a good deal about him from . . . Students and Faculty last year. . . . they all found him stimulating. Then last month I met him at

the dinner Miss Perkins gave for Mr. Morgan . . . and again the next day when he and his wife were special guests at a Faculty tea, before his brilliant Tchekhov lecture. . . . the morning after the Tchekhov lecture we discussed it and him at breakfast—French, Italian, Spanish, American professors plus Miss McCrum, and I was astonished that he is actually so great a source of intellectual ferment to Faculty members of all sorts and conditions.²⁴

In April, Amy Kelly—who used Nabokov's *Atlantic* pieces in her composition classes—organized with Agnes Perkins a petition to have him retained. Despite all this pressure, nothing moved. He had been hired at Wellesley not simply because of the brilliance of his lectures, but also because his outspoken comparisons of the mediocrity and barbarity of Nazi and Soviet rule had been just what people wanted to hear at the time that the Hitler-Stalin pact was leading to the subjugation of Europe. Now, as Soviet battalions and Soviet citizens desperately tried to resist the German invaders, and as America's entry into the war made the U.S. and the USSR official allies, Nabokov's forthrightness was likely to make him an embarrassment to Wellesley president Mildred McAfee, about to be summoned to Washington as head of the Women's Naval Reserve (WAVES, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service). Although Nabokov had the sense not to broadcast his anti-Soviet opinions at a time when the Soviet Union was losing so much ground and so many lives to Hitler, President McAfee turned down his permanent appointment on the ground that the special fund from which his initial post had been financed was all but exhausted.²⁵

Dejected by the uncertainty of the coming year, Nabokov signed up with the Institute of International Education in April for a lecture tour in the fall. He offered a wide choice of lectures: "The Art of Writing"; "The Novel"; "The Short Story"; "The Tragedy of Tragedy"; "The Artist and Commonsense"; "Hard Facts about Readers"; "A Century of Exile"; "The Strange Fate of Russian Literature"; and a lecture apiece on Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, and Tolstoy. The broadsheet advertising Nabokov's availability ended with this ringing praise from Philip Mosely of Cornell: "I should like to add that in my own opinion, and in that of many far better experts than myself, Mr. Nabokov (under his pen-name of 'Sirin') is already the greatest Russian novelist writing today, and contains infinite promise of ever greater achievement. . . . I use these superlatives about his writing deliberately, for I have been reading his work in Russian since 1932."²⁶

Nabokov knew that such backing had so far counted for very little. After registering for the army, he almost hoped he might be drafted.

He cheerfully saw himself perhaps leading a platoon by the fall, but he waited in vain to be called.²⁷

VI

By May the Wellesley students had end-of-year deadlines to meet and no need for extracurricular excitement à la Nabokov. The first weekend in May, Nabokov visited the Wilsons at Cape Cod for twenty-four hours, taking Pushkin, a butterfly net, and his mimicry article. He met Randall Jarrell, who found him "just wonderful, an extremely charming person." He read Mary McCarthy's first book, *The Company She Keeps*, and was very agreeably surprised, "quite flabbergasted" in fact.²⁸

Later in the month he visited Yale, where he was offered a position. It turned out to be no more than that of assistant Russian-language instructor for the summer course, "but as I would have to teach the main professor Russian too, I refused." In fact, Nabokov thought that Professor Trager, who spoke Russian with a thick Odessa accent acquired from his parents in Brooklyn, was not interested in his academic competence "so much as in finding someone who spoke Russian somewhat as he did." Nabokov told Dean de Vane "the post doesn't suit me, I'm long used to painting them (posts) with my own pigment," although he hoped that they might still invite him as a lecturer on Russian literature. The fortunes of war had made Russia very fashionable, and still Nabokov could find nothing. He confided his exasperation to Wilson: "Funny—to know Russian better than any living person—in America at least—and more English than any Russian in America,—and to experience such difficulty in getting a university job. I am getting rather jittery about next year."²⁹

Russia's current popularity did bring one benefit. James Laughlin visited Nabokov in mid-May and commissioned from him a volume of verse translations of Pushkin and Tyutchev and a two-hundred-page critical work on Gogol, for a small advance. Nabokov immersed himself at once in the Gogol book, hoping to send off the finished manuscript by mid-July. For light relief, he wrote at Edmund Wilson's suggestion a poem called "The Man of Tomorrow's Lament": on Superman's wedding night, the Man of Steel's vigor causes his honeymoon suite to explode. Alas, poor Lois! The prim *New Yorker* turned it down, and no manuscript survives.³⁰

* Nabokov did not exaggerate: another Russian who worked under Trager had difficulty understanding him.

By now Nabokov had finished his first major lepidopterological article, "Some New or Little-Known Nearctic *Neonympha*," and was working two days a week at the M.C.Z., ruling over the lepidoptera room on his own now that his preparator had gone off to war. In June, he learned that he had been appointed a Research Fellow in Entomology at the M.C.Z. for the 1942–1943 academic year. The salary was only \$1,000, but it was a part-time post, and until then he had been working for nothing. Besides, it was all the future seemed to hold.³¹

Since Dmitri had been ill all winter and had just had his adenoids removed, his parents badly wanted him to spend a summer in the country but could not have afforded a vacation had the Karpoviches not invited them back to their Vermont farmhouse for the summer. After a few days there in early June, the family returned to Vermont again for July and August. Nabokov converted part of the attic into a comfortable studio and devoted eight to ten hours a day to his Gogol book, slowed greatly by the need to translate so much: "I have lost a week already translating passages I need in the 'Inspector General' as I can do nothing with Constance Garnett's dry shit." He wrote to James Laughlin that he was eager to have *The Gift* published and translated, and explained that he needed as a translator "a man who knows English better than Russian—and a man, not a woman. I am frankly homosexual on the subject of translators." Laughlin suggested Yarmolinsky of the New York Public Library's Slavonic Division, but Nabokov dismissed the idea:

I have seen Yarmolinsky's and his wife's translation of Pushkin:* their work is conscientious, reasonably exact and careful but they lack my main desiderata: style and a rich vocabulary. Without a good deal of linguistic and poetical imagination it is useless tackling my stuff. . . . I know it is difficult to find a man who has enough Russian to understand my writings and at the same time can turn his English inside out and slice, chop, twist, volley, smash, kill, drive, half-volley, lob and place perfectly every word; Yarmolinsky will gently pat the ball into the net—or send it sailing into the neighbor's garden.³²

VII

On September 1, 1942, the Nabokovs moved to Cambridge, fifteen minutes' walk from the Harvard campus and the M.C.Z., at 8 Craigie Circle, apartment 35, a dingy little third-floor flat in a four-story brick

* Yarmolinsky would supply literal translations from the Russian to be turned into English rhymes by his wife, the poet Babette Deutsch.

apartment house at the end of a cul-de-sac. They would live here for almost another six years, the one exception to the otherwise nomadic pattern of their American existence. In this two-bedroom apartment, Véra and Dmitri shared one bedroom while Nabokov had the other, where he would write late into the night, walking about, pencil in hand, "under an old lady with feet of stone and above a young woman with hypersensitive hearing," before settling down to sleep for four or five hours.³³

One hundred dollars' worth of secondhand furniture was all the Nabokovs needed to deck out the apartment. Their friend Wilma Kerby-Miller declared—and everyone close to them at this time says much the same—"I never knew any family who cared less about possessions, food, anything. Their only luxury was Dmitri"—who had expensive toys and went to some of the most prestigious private schools in New England.³⁴

Sometimes part of the school fees would be paid off by Véra's giving lessons or working as a secretary at Harvard, but as a rule she had quite enough work as housekeeper and mother and in typing up the pages her husband had left on the floor after the previous night's composition. Wilma Kerby-Miller called her "a one-man woman, she worked with him, helped him, it was her great interest in life. She married a genius, and saw that he had every opportunity."³⁵ Harry and Elena Levin too were struck by Véra's certainty that her husband was the greatest living writer, and the support she afforded him with her business sense, her secretarial skills, her meticulous compilation of reviews, her sheer conviction and dedication.

Living in Cambridge, the Nabokovs began to see the Levins frequently. Nabokov always regarded himself as a poor talker. Harry Levin, himself no sluggard of the spoken word, thought Nabokov a brilliant conversationalist with an instant sense of the genuine in people and a distaste for the least pretension, which he could deflate in half a sentence. What impressed Levin most of all was Nabokov's inventiveness as a *mystificateur*. Once Ralph Barton Perry, a distinguished Harvard philosophy professor, was a guest at the Levins' house. At that time he was involved as a Concerned Citizen in U.S. relations with its allies, and in the middle of 1943's pro-Soviet fervor he published in the *New Republic* an article entitled "American-Soviet Friendship: An Invitation to an Agreement." Sensing Perry's political sympathies, Nabokov began to weave a spell around him. He claimed to Perry that although Stalin might be present at the Tehran conference, the real Soviet leader was Pavlovsky, the man always standing beside him in the newspaper photographs and posing as no more than an interpreter. It was Pavlovsky who pulled the strings,

Pavlovsky whom the United States would have to learn to understand. Perry took this *ad lib* apocrypha for gospel.³⁶

According to one informant, Harry Levin himself once fell victim to a similar hoax. Early in their relationship Nabokov noticed Levin's air of having read every literary work imaginable. One evening he invented a nineteenth-century novelist and proceeded to fill out details of his life and works, while Levin gave no sign all evening that he had not heard of, let alone had not read, the writer who owed his niche in literary history only to Nabokov's impromptu inspiration.³⁷

VIII

Now that they were established in Cambridge the Nabokovs saw more of Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy. McCarthy was shocked at the Nabokovs' plain fare and their indifference to their surroundings, to things like the hideous lampshades and the brass ashtrays in their sitting room. On the other hand, when Nabokov visited the Wilsons he made friendly fun of McCarthy's fussing over culinary delicacies by concocting for her fancy treats his own even fancier names. He also disclosed as a grim family secret that at home they might have a carp served up with boiled potatoes and carrots and live off the dish for a week. McCarthy believed him.³⁸

Often in Cambridge the Nabokovs would meet the Wilsons in the Levins' much more spacious home. Elena Levin saw the two friends as "such opposite kinds of human: Volodya subtle, reclusive, familial; Edmund blunt, commonsensical, and after three drinks he 'collapsed like a bag of potatoes,' in Volodya's words." Even early on, Harry Levin noticed, the two men, for all the richness of their relationship and their admiration for each other, also grated against each other—and this in the peak years of their friendship. Wilson disliked Nabokov's unruffled self-confidence and frank self-delight and his dismissiveness of other writers. Nabokov admired Wilson's range of interests but also found it rather amusingly forced. Once Wilson asked him to invite entomologists to a party he was giving at Craigie Circle. None turned up, but, not realizing this, Wilson cornered the two or three guests—actually Nabokov's literature colleagues from Wellesley—assuming they were M.C.Z. scientists, and tried to talk shop. As Nabokov recalled with a smile, his guests "were indeed taken aback by the famous Edmund Wilson's sudden interest in insect lore."³⁹

Judging art at its highest and most impersonal, Nabokov had implacable standards, and as a critic he hugely enjoyed hurling writers

he deemed interlopers down the slopes of Olympus. At a personal level, on the other hand, he would look for what he could find to like in other people's work. He respected the vulnerability of others and was as sensitive to his friends as he was undemanding of his students. Wilson, on the other hand, had a compulsive competitiveness that meant he had to counterbalance praise with reproach, either providing a list of corrections, no matter how captious, or implying that at the midpoint of a story he had seen a rather better way to finish it than its author had chosen. Wilson seemed to expect the recipient to be charmed by his behavior, by the special Wilsonian tartness of judgment and independence of imagination. Even at an early stage in their relationship, Nabokov detected this irrationality in his friend. Nevertheless he was deeply fond of Wilson, and almost from the start wrote to him with a warmth that Wilson seldom matched. To their common friend Roman Grynberg, Nabokov confided that with Wilson the "lyrical plaint" that adorns Russian friendship seemed to be lacking—as it generally was, he felt, among Anglo-Saxons: "I love a violin in personal relationships, but in this case there is no way one can let out a heartfelt sigh or casually unburden a soft fresh bit of oneself. Still, there's a good deal else to make up for it."⁴⁰

IX

Newly installed in Craigie Circle, Nabokov had no position at Wellesley for 1942–1943 and just a thousand dollars for the coming year's research at the M.C.Z. He desperately needed other income, even if it meant delaying his Gogol book, which had kept him busy from May to September. He applied for a Guggenheim Fellowship for the following year to give him time to work on a novel. Meanwhile he had no choice but to undertake a two-month lecture tour the Institute of International Education had been able to arrange for him.

When in his last decade of life Nabokov planned a second volume of his autobiography, a *Speak On, Memory* or a *Speak, America*, he expected to devote one chapter to his friendship with Edmund Wilson, another to his American adventures in lepidoptera, and a third to this lecture tour.⁴¹ He mentally allotted this thin slice of his American experience a whole chapter partly for the simple practical reason that he had preserved such a complete record of the trip in his long letters to his wife, but also because these travels exposed him to so much of the variety of America. Although his adventures sometimes had a Pninian cast, his observations always reveal an alertness to America that poor abstracted Pnin could never approach.

On September 30 he set off by overnight train for his first lectures, at Coker College in Hartsville, South Carolina. He could not sleep all night, but the next day's landscapes made up for it, their oil-paint hues with a shimmer of green seeming just as he had pictured a valley in the Caucasus might look. When his train pulled in an hour late to Florence, the nearest stop to Hartsville, the connecting bus had long since disappeared. He phoned Coker College; they promised to call back about a car. Feeling tired, bristly, grimy, and irritated, he waited an hour and a half by a restaurant telephone. At last the phone rang and a rich-voiced professor announced he was coming to Florence on business and would take him back at six o'clock in time for his eight o'clock lecture. When Nabokov pointed out that this meant he would have to wait there another three hours, the voice said he would come right away and take him to a hotel.

Not sure he had heard correctly, Nabokov sat in the railway waiting room. After a time he thought he heard a taxi driver calling what sounded like his name. No, it turned out, the name was Yellowwater. The garrulous taxi driver also told him that another cabbie had been ordered to collect someone from the station and to take the person to a hotel, but after running into a truck had asked *him* to pick the customer up. Nabokov thought the hotel was the one he was headed for, and asked again if the taxi had not come for him. Indeed, the person to be picked up was to go to Hartsville, but the taxi driver had not been given his name or the name of the person who had ordered the taxi, and there was no way of finding them out. Nabokov wondered whether he should take the taxi himself straight to Coker College—but then the owner of the rich voice might look for him forever. Deciding that the taxi must have come for him after all, he had himself driven to the Selman Hotel.

There, nobody knew anything, and he had foolishly let the taxi go, and he sensed in a flush of panic that it was all a mistake, that he had been brought here instead of someone else, that the Voice would be looking for him hopelessly at the station. He resolved to call Coker College, so that he could at least find out the Voice's name. Going to the information desk, he heard a person in the crowd telling someone else he could not understand why a taxi he had sent to fetch someone from the station had failed to return. Nabokov butted in and rather desperately asked if it were not *him* he was after? "Oh, no, I am waiting for a Russian professor." "But I *am* the Russian professor." "Well, you don't look like one," he laughed. No photograph had been sent: no wonder, Nabokov wrote to his wife, that the college expected someone with Dostoevsky's beard, Stalin's mustache, and Chekhov's pince-nez, in a Tolstoyan blouse.

Nabokov arrived at Coker College, sprinted through a bath, found his cuffs too starched for cuff links to fit, then in his hurry lost one on the floor. He had to roll up his shirtsleeves under his tuxedo, but as soon as he went down to dinner he disentangled himself from this series of Pninian mishaps by confessing his plight. That relaxed his tension and everybody else's, some cuff links were produced, and from that point on Nabokov's three days at Coker passed without a hitch.

Lodged in comfort in the Coker family mansion, he was introduced to Southern society through the family and its connections. But Nabokov was at least as interested in the region's insect population as its human one. After his lecture that first night, he caught moths in a tumbler on the brightly lit columns of the mansion's colonnade. During the daytime he chased butterflies on his own in the garden of the estate, and with a biology teacher and another lepidopterist out in the countryside. He played tennis with the best player in the college, he went canoeing in a labyrinthine creek winding through cypresses and cedars, he donned dinner jackets three nights in a row, and he received a hundred dollars for his time.⁴²

When war conditions caused one engagement to fall through he was diverted to Spelman College, a black women's college in Atlanta, where he arrived on October 7. Depressed by the Uncle Tomism he had already witnessed in the South, he was delighted to spend five days in this "black Wellesley." In his lecture on Pushkin he stressed the poet's Abyssinian grandfather, his immense pride in his African ancestry, his laughing white teeth between negroid lips. "Incidentally," he added, "Pushkin provides a most striking example of mankind at its very best when human races are able to freely mix." The lecture was received with wild enthusiasm.

Apart from his Pushkin lecture, Nabokov also read his own poems and lectured on literature and lepidoptera. He chased insects one afternoon with another biology teacher and a very intense group of young black women. He mingled easily with the students, and hit it off particularly well with the college president, Florence Read, a vibrant, astute older woman who surrounded him with every attention and would become a long-term friend of the Nabokov family. He breakfasted with her every day, discussing everything from the Negro problem to telepathy. She told him he would have to go to chapel at 9:00 A.M., but he protested he was a heretic and hated music and singing. "You'll *love* ours," she insisted, and led him off. Every evening she invited black leaders for her guest to meet over dinner.⁴³

His next stop, on October 13, was at Georgia State College for Women at Valdosta, almost on the Florida border. Here he lectured

on "Art and Common Sense," on war novels, and on mimicry, and read "Mademoiselle O" and some of his translations of Russian verse. At a very funny and very vulgar women's group—perhaps a forerunner of Charlotte Haze's clubs—he recited his verse only to have the chairwoman tell him afterward with a lyrical leer: "What I loved best was the broken English." He played tennis with Valdosta's president, Frank Reade, and found him as charming and brilliant as Spelman's Florence Read, as irrational as Wilson, as egocentric as himself.* A biology teacher took him for four hours on the chase—and his best day's butterfly catch—in palmetto wilds and pine forests in the Okefenokee swamp. He tried to write a little of his Gogol book and his novel, but everywhere he went people tried to please him from morning until night. His "having a good time," he knew, meant wasting his time.⁴⁴

On the way back from Valdosta he had to stop overnight again in Atlanta. When he called on Florence Read, she presented him with a huge reproduction of a detail of some butterflies in an Egyptian fresco. Nabokov realized at once that since butterfly speciation is singularly rapid and diverse and since butterflies are so well represented in art, millennia-old paintings might have recorded evolution in action. The next day he wrote to Véra that he would write something about it.⁴⁵ More than twenty years later, he would indeed begin research for a book on butterflies in art.

X

Though delighted by all the attention he had received, Nabokov was tired, and after one more lecture stop, at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, he headed back to Boston at the end of October. In Cambridge for ten days, he had time to fall ill, recover, and put in some hard work at the M.C.Z., where—since he had become de facto curator of lepidoptera—Véra in his absence had filled in for him, repinning butterflies from tray to tray. On November 5 he set off reluctantly for the second stage of his tour, knowing that at this time of year the Midwest would offer no butterflies to compensate for the dislocations of travel. Still, he had a superb first day at the Field Museum in Chicago, where he found his *Neonymphas* and showed the staff how to reclassify them and arrange them in their tray.⁴⁶

At Macalester College in St. Paul, Nabokov found that he did not

* Years later he would place Reade undisguised in *Prin*.

have with him the text of the lecture he was to give on the novel. He decided to speak without notes and found it came out well: he set the students

a little quiz—ten definitions of a reader, and from these ten the students had to choose four definitions that would combine to make a good reader. I have mislaid the list, but as far as I remember the definitions went something like this. Select four answers to the question what should a reader be to be a good reader:

1. The reader should belong to a book club.
2. The reader should identify himself or herself with the hero or heroine.
3. The reader should concentrate on the social-economic angle.
4. The reader should prefer a story with action and dialogue to one with none.
5. The reader should have seen the book in a movie.
6. The reader should be a budding author.
7. The reader should have imagination.
8. The reader should have memory.
9. The reader should have a dictionary.
10. The reader should have some artistic sense.

In future years, whenever he taught literature courses at Wellesley or Cornell, Nabokov would tell the story of this quiz. "You know me a little, they did not, those young ladies in Minnesota," he would point out before reporting that the Macalester students had "leaned heavily on emotional identification, action, and the social-economic or historic angle. Of course, as you have guessed, the good reader is one who has imagination, memory, a dictionary and some artistic sense."⁴⁷

The cold and the traveling were beginning to weigh on his spirits. One night, bored, he went to a movie and returned on foot, walking for an hour through the icy wind. He reported to Véra afterward:

On the way a lightning bolt of undefined inspiration ran right through me, a terrible desire to write, and write in Russian—but it's impossible. I don't think anyone who hasn't experienced these feelings can properly appreciate them, the torment, the tragedy. English in this case is an illusion, ersatz. In my usual condition—busy with butterflies, translations or academic writing—I myself don't fully register all the grief and bitterness of my situation. . . . I have felt with absolute clarity that if it were not for the two of you I would go as a soldier to Morocco, where there are marvelous *Lycaenids* in the mountains. . . . But how much more than this I would like to write a book in Russian.⁴⁸

A month later he would tell his close friend George Hessen, just arrived in New York, that he felt the Sirin in him beginning to stir again, and that although he had created a person who had in turn created *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and his *New Yorker* poems, it all seemed somehow a game he was playing.⁴⁹

The next stop was Knox College, in Galesburg, Illinois. By now he was thoroughly exhausted and depressed. His accommodations had been paid for at Coker College and Spelman, but since all his other travel expenses had come out of his own pocket, the tour was proving a financial failure. Although headed back East, he was expected to travel on to Virginia and to keep on traveling well into December. Instead he had to cancel the next stage of the tour and return to Cambridge on November 18 with a bad attack of flu.⁵⁰

He set off again at the beginning of December, staying for two days in New York to catch up on friends. Visiting the American Museum of Natural History, he gasped with delight when he saw the red type label on his Grand Canyon butterfly.* En route to Washington he wrote a new poem, "On Discovering a Butterfly,"⁵¹ which reads in part:

I found it and I named it, being versed
in taxonomic Latin; thus became
godfather to an insect and its first
describer—and I want no other fame.

Wide open on its pin (though fast asleep),
and safe from creeping relatives and rust,
in the secluded stronghold where we keep
type specimens it will transcend its dust.

Dark pictures, thrones, the stones that pilgrims kiss,
poems that take a thousand years to die
but ape the immortality of this
red label on a little butterfly.

This, Nabokov's best English poem to date, summed up the great consolation America offered for his having to relinquish the language he had learned as a child: the chance to enact his childhood dream of exploration and lepidopteral discovery. But the fair copy of the poem, typed on M.C.Z. letterhead paper, showed all too painfully the occasional thinness of his English. The ninth line now reads: "My

* Normally, specimens in museum collections are identified by small white labels. In the published "original description" ("o.d.") of a new species, however, a particular specimen is designated the type specimen, a sort of Standard Yard for the species, and in the museum where it is housed it is identified by a red label.

needles have teased out its sculptured sex." In the fair copy he sent off to the *New Yorker*, the line ended: "its horny sex."* When the *New Yorker* editors explained why the phrase was impossible, he thanked them "for saving that line from an ignorance-is-bliss disaster. And that nightmare pun. . . . This has somewhat subdued me—I was getting rather pleased with my English."⁵² The man who would write *Lolita* still had much to discover in America and in English.

He stopped in Washington—only to visit the Smithsonian Institution and sort out its *Neonymphas*—en route to Longwood College in Farmville, Virginia. On his return to Cambridge he found Véra ill with pneumonia and in the hospital.⁵³

In the last weeks of December he managed at last to complete his Gogol book, originally to have been called *Gogol through the Looking Glass* but published as plain *Nikolay Gogol*. He had looked forward to savaging a new translation of *Dead Souls* by Bernard Gilbert Guernsey, announced in 1942 under the title *Chichikov's Journeys, or Home Life in Old Russia*: "I am eager—viciously eager—to see 'Home Life.' It is like calling a version of 'Fleurs du Mal'—'The Daisy Chain.' " In fact, the translation proved to be very good, far better than any previous versions in English, and Nabokov not only said so in his book, but even approached Guernsey to translate his own Russian novels. Nothing came of their negotiations when Guernsey insisted on almost half the royalties.⁵⁴

XI

Nikolay Gogol

Commissioned as a popularizing work, Nabokov's *Nikolay Gogol* has succeeded brilliantly: it has done more for Gogol in the English-speaking world than any other book. Yet from start to finish Nabokov reveals a horror of the obvious summary and the patient exposition of the popularizer. Instead, he chooses the surprising (the book begins with Gogol's death and ends with his birth), the outrageous, the impatient dismissal. As a study of Gogol, it is deliberately incomplete: it picks only the best of Gogol—or rather, only what Nabokov values within the best—and waves away the rest. But what he does touch on is magical.

He warns off those who might turn to Gogol as a realist, a social satirist, a moralist: "If you expect to find out something about Russia,

* The male genitalia of butterflies, essential clues in distinguishing one species from another superficially related one, are complex ("sculptured"), rigid ("horny") armatures.

. . . keep away. He has nothing to tell you. Keep off the tracks. High tension. Closed for the duration. Avoid, refrain, don't. I would like to have here a full list of all possible interdictions, vetoes and threats." Nabokov does smooth and oversimplify when he sets Gogol the magnificent artist of the great works of 1836–1842, *The Government Inspector*, *Dead Souls*, and "The Overcoat," against Gogol the would-be preacher, in his last ten misguided and sterile years of life. Gogol did not simply burn bright and then in his last years turn to ash: even at his best he seemed like a wet log on a fire, smoking, spitting, flaming, sparking, erupting gas from unexpected fissures, all in the most unpredictable sequence and always burning *uneasily*. Nabokov reduces the unease in Gogol. Readers have supposed that he devoted a book to Gogol because he had a greater affinity for him than for other Russian writers. In fact, as his lectures reveal, he cared more for Pushkin, Tolstoy, and Chekhov: his affinity is not so much for the mottled conglomerate of the actual Gogol as for the polished proto-Nabokov he can extract from this recalcitrant ore.

What Nabokov does select from Gogol he invests with superb excitement, often turning things that may be overlooked or seem bland or even inartistic into imaginative triumphs that defy what had seemed acceptable art: the thunderclap suddenness of *The Government Inspector*, and its swarm of secondary characters who can leap into life in the space of an aside; the splendid poetry of the irrelevant in *Dead Souls*, the crazy vitality of its similes, the unrestrained vividness of its visual world; the disturbing vibrations of "The Overcoat."

Although he denies that Gogol may be seen as a realist or a satirist, Nabokov does not proclaim an aesthetic of art for art's sake. He hails Gogol as a critic not of particular social conditions but of the universal vice of deadened sensibility, *poshlost'*, self-satisfied vulgarity. His magnificent definition of *poshlost'* here has fixed the concept in the minds of the cultivated English-speaking world.

Nabokov's commentary rises to a superb crescendo in his final chapter, on "The Overcoat," a brilliant introduction not so much to Gogol as to Nabokov's own aesthetics:

Gogol was a strange creature, but genius is always strange; it is only your healthy second-rater who seems to the grateful reader to be a wise old friend, nicely developing the reader's own notions of life. . . . Gogol's *The Overcoat* is a grotesque and grim nightmare making black holes in the dim pattern of life. The superficial reader of that story will merely see in it the heavy frolics of an extravagant buffoon; the solemn reader will take for granted that Gogol's prime intention was to denounce the

horrors of Russian bureaucracy. . . . Give me the creative reader; this is a tale for him.

Steady Pushkin, matter-of-fact Tolstoy, restrained Chekhov have all had their moments of irrational insight which simultaneously blurred the sentence and disclosed a secret meaning worth the sudden focal shift. But with Gogol this shifting is the very basis of his art.

Earlier in the book, Nabokov has sometimes merely dismissed any social side to Gogol. Now he explains this not as a rejection of extra-literary values, but in terms of art's refusal to confine itself to a particular time and place.

Russian progressive critics sensed in him the image of the underdog and the whole story impressed them as a social protest. But it is something much more than that. The gaps and black holes in the texture of Gogol's style imply flaws in the texture of life itself. Something is very wrong and all men are mild lunatics engaged in petty pursuits that seem to them very important while an absurdly logical force keeps them at their futile jobs—this is the real "message" of the story.

Soon after *Nikolay Gogol* was published, Nabokov replied to one of his readers, who thought he had expelled all ethics from the world of aesthetics:

I never meant to deny the moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skillfully written. There is a deep morality in *The Overcoat* which I have tried to convey in my book, but this morality has certainly nothing whatever to do with the cheap political propaganda which some overzealous admirers in nineteenth century Russia have tried to squeeze out of, or rather into it, and which, in my opinion does violence to the story and to the very notion of art.

By the same token, although you may be right that Gogol did not object to serfdom, the interior moral standards of the book bristle against it. And the reader is more impressed by the bodily serfdom of the peasants and the inevitably following spiritual serfdom of the owners than by the petty roguery of Chichikov.⁵⁵

As his chapter on "The Overcoat" rises to a climax, Nabokov comes closer and closer to outlining aspects of his own aesthetics:

the diver, the seeker for black pearls, the man who prefers the monsters of the deep to the sunshades on the beach, will find in *The Overcoat* shadows linking our state of existence to those other states and modes we dimly apprehend in our rare moments of irrational perception. . . .

. . . At this superhigh level of art, literature is of course not concerned with pitying the underdog or cursing the upperdog. It appeals to that secret depth of the human soul where the shadows of other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships.

One of the chief arguments of *Nikolay Gogol* is that Gogol achieves his weird tiltings and sudden focal shifts by subtle effects of language, and that the only way to experience his magic is to learn the Russian language. Nabokov rightly deplored all prior English translations of Gogol for smoothing over or eliminating precisely those bizarre moves that make him so spellbinding. Only when Nabokov's manuscript was almost completed did Guernsey's translation of *Dead Souls* appear. Nabokov referred the reader to Guernsey's version as "an extraordinarily fine piece of work." Privately he was harsher and more exact: Guernsey's translation "lacks the poetic and musical (and nightmarish!) qualities of the original, but it is fairly exact and is the work of an honest mind."⁵⁶

Nabokov's own extracts from Gogol are vastly superior to Guernsey's and are still the only versions that can convey to the anglophone reader why Russians regard Gogol so highly. After Pushkin, Gogol is the most untranslatable of major Russian writers. In his first four years in America, Nabokov had already translated some of Pushkin's finest verse. Unfortunately he did not have time to translate even a single complete work by Gogol. But the long passage from the end of "The Diary of a Madman" that he chooses for the epigraph to *Nikolay Gogol* makes us feel at once in immediate contact with a writer of dazzling, disturbing genius. There could be no better advertisement for Gogol than that one paragraph. What a loss that Nabokov simply had too much of his own work to do to be able to offer English-speaking readers the essential Gogol undiluted.

• C H A P T E R 3 •

Scientist, Writer, Teacher: Cambridge and Wellesley, 1943–1944

HUMBERT: Is that a rare specimen?

NABOKOV: A specimen cannot be common or rare, it can only be poor or perfect.

HUMBERT: Could you direct me—

NABOKOV: You meant "rare species." This is a good specimen of a rather scarce subspecies.

—*Lolita: A Screenplay*

I

IN 1943 THE STRANGE triple life Nabokov would lead for the next five years began in earnest: lepidopterist, writer, teacher. After returning to Cambridge from his lecture tours, he worked, engrossed, at the M.C.Z. By now he was specializing in his laboratory work not simply on the Lycaenids, one of the eleven North American families of butterfly, but on one of its four subfamilies, *Plebejinae*, the so-called blues.

Identification and classification within this abundant group of small butterflies—many predominantly brown or whitish rather than blue—can often be extremely difficult, and requires examination under the microscope of the structure of the male genitalia. At any other manual work Nabokov felt himself all thumbs, but when he began to dismantle a butterfly he found he suddenly developed very delicate hands and fine fingers and could do anything. He would prize apart under the microscope one hooked lobe of the somewhat triangular genitalia, remove the genitalia from the butterfly, coat them in glycerine, and place them in a mixture of alcohol and water in a separate labeled vial for each specimen. This, he had found, enabled him to turn the organs around under the microscope to obtain a three-dimensional view impossible on a conventional microscope slide. He would later write: "Since I devoted up to six hours daily to this kind

of research my eyesight was impaired for ever; but on the other hand, the years at the Harvard Museum remain the most delightful and thrilling in all my adult life."¹

All through the winter and spring of 1943, Nabokov examined 350 male specimens of the genus *Lycaeides*. The resulting paper, "The Nearctic Forms of *Lycaeides* Hüb[ner]," established the first of his two major principles of broad application in lepidoptery, his analysis of the extremely complex genitalia of the blues. He named the parts of their structure (some of these names have now become the standard terms) and showed that the varying ratios of certain parts could clearly differentiate species. He was also able to deduce an ancestral form of the *Lycaeides* male armature.²

At the same time he had new fiction to write. In January 1943 he composed his first English short story, "The Assistant Producer."³ For once he tells a story that really happened, but by presenting everything as if on a movie screen he makes the facts appear an impossibly trite romantic fiction. In Berlin he had known the celebrated Russian popular singer Nadezhda Plevitskaya, and admired her natural vocal gifts while recoiling from her vulgarity of taste. In 1938 she was sentenced to twenty years' imprisonment for her part in helping her husband—who meanwhile had vanished—to abduct and presumably kill General Miller, head of the émigré All-Russian Military Union in Paris. General Kutepov, Miller's predecessor, had been murdered years earlier.

In "The Assistant Producer," the famous Russian popular singer "La Slavska" marries a White Army general, Golubkov. (In real life his name was Skoblin.) Obsessed with becoming head of the White Warriors' Union, Golubkov becomes a triple agent, serving not only this remnant of the White Army but also the Germans and the Soviets in order to dispose of two, perhaps three of the generals previously heading the union (Wrangel, Kutepov, and Miller). Nabokov tells the story with astonishing speed, color, and precision, rushing from set to set—a Civil War battlefield, Chaliapin's dressing room, soirees at La Slavska's—even as he piles theme upon theme: the singer, the dashing general, the émigré background, the Hollywood studio where a movie might be made from the story, the cinema where one might watch the movie. The story brilliantly inverts life and art: events appear to be purloined from movieland, but in fact come straight from life—which itself seems to have imitated bad art. Having defined *poshlost'* in *Nikolay Gogol*, Nabokov now shows it in action in "The Assistant Producer": the vulgarity of soul of Hollywood art, La Slavska's craft, Golubkov's obsessive dream, and the rank politics of the Russian monarchists, Germans, and Soviets whom this strange pair serve.

II

While his wife had been ill with pneumonia Nabokov had given his son lessons in basic Russian grammar. As Dmitri recalls, "he was as precise, charming and inspiring in this basic discipline as in others."⁴ Nabokov had counted on his lecture tour to supplement his meager M.C.Z. fellowship, but travel expenses had left him very little net profit. He had still heard nothing from the Guggenheim Foundation. Meanwhile Wellesley College students, eager to take extra courses that could be seen as "war service" or of value "for service in the period of reconstruction," were buoyed up by the enthusiasm for the Soviet Union that swept America after the decisive defeat of the Germans at the siege of Stalingrad, the turning point of the war on the eastern front.

With Wellesley students anxious to learn and Nabokov needing extra money from teaching, an unofficial, noncredit course in elementary Russian was set up for the spring term of 1943. Nabokov taught one hundred young women, each paying ten dollars for the term, apparently in four classes of about twenty-five each. Two days a week he traveled out to Wellesley after lunch, not returning until after midnight.⁵

The classes were informal and largely unprepared: Nabokov worked through George Birkett's *Modern Russian Course* (he would turn this one grammar over in his hands in front of the class, as if appalled by its lack of bulk), but would digress enthusiastically as fancy prompted. "Please take out your mirrors, girls, and see what happens inside your mouths": "In pronouncing the vowels «а, э, ы, о, у» . . . your tongue keeps back—independent and aloof—whereas in «я, е, и, ё, ю»—the squashed vowels—it rushes and crushes itself against your lower teeth—a prisoner dashing himself at the bars of his cell." He could couple the sober prose of the grammatical rule with the poetry of example, the mnemonics of wit:

Genitive case requires *a* on the end:

stol poeta	[the poet's desk]
stul poeta	[the poet's chair]
stil' poeta	[the poet's style]

He set homework, and marked it gently and politely: "Take care of your 'y'!" "Will you *please* do this one again." And the students who thought they might become Communists he disabused of their illusions about the Soviet Union.⁶

The pro-Soviet euphoria that had swelled Nabokov's class numbers was becoming absurd. *Life* magazine devoted an issue of ill-in-

formed gush to Russia. Hollywood made a film of Ambassador Joseph Davies's fatuously pro-Stalin best-seller *Mission to Moscow*. Bennett Cerf of Random House suggested a formal ban on books critical of the Soviet Union, though it was hardly needed: a de facto ban was already in place.⁷

In a strange fit of optimism or ignorance, the pro-Soviet New York journal *Novosel'e* wrote to Nabokov soliciting new work. Now that the war had turned and it was apparent that Hitler would be defeated, Nabokov, like America's minute anti-Stalinist intelligentsia, felt it was time to protest the glorification of Russia's own mass murderer—even if to a public that did not want to hear. Early in April he sent *Novosel'e* eight fierce lines of Russian verse:

No matter how the Soviet tinsel glitters
upon the canvas of a battle piece;
no matter how the soul dissolves in pity,
I will not bend, I will not cease
loathing the filth, brutality, and boredom
of silent servitude. No, no, I shout,
my spirit is still quick, still exile-hungry,
I'm still a poet, count me out!

In copied and recopied manuscripts the poem began to circulate among New York's émigré Russian socialists like forbidden literature under the tsars. On seeing the poem, Kerensky burst into tears.⁸

At the end of March, Nabokov heard he had won a Guggenheim Fellowship for "Creative Writing in the field of the novel": \$2,500, tax-free, for the year June 1943–June 1944. Nabokov, the first person for whom the Guggenheim's under-forty rule was broken, had Edmund Wilson's strong recommendation to thank (Wilson had himself won a Guggenheim in 1935 in the midst of his Marxist phase to study at the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute in Moscow). Nabokov was also awarded another year as Research Fellow in Entomology at the M.C.Z. for \$1,200, and his position there would be renewed annually until he left for Cornell in 1948. Between lepidoptery and teaching he began to work on the last translations of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev for the volume *Three Russian Poets* that Laughlin had commissioned for New Directions.⁹

In mid-April Nabokov traveled to Sweet Briar College, near Amherst, Virginia, which he had been scheduled to visit when he caught the flu at the end of November. On his way to Sweet Briar he stopped in New York, where in addition to Edmund Wilson and colleagues from the American Museum of Natural History he had many close

friends from the emigration to see. George Hessen and his father Iosif, Nabokov's friend and editor at *Rul'*, had arrived safely in December 1942, and it was a serious loss to Nabokov that Hessen père died before he could catch up with him again in America. Véra Nabokov's sister Sonia Slonim, her cousin Anna Feigin, and Nabokov's ex-pupil Maria Marinell and her sisters Elizaveta and Ina had all reached New York over the last two years by more or less circuitous and harrowing routes. Now in New York, Nabokov could pay a taxi with a little more aplomb than on his first day off the boat. Meeting the Marinell sisters and Nathalie Nabokoff on the steps of the American Museum of Natural History, he boarded a taxi with them. At their destination he jumped out of the cab first and threw the fare onto the seat: "You know in all those romantic novels the hero throws money down on the seat. I wanted to see how it feels and how it looks."¹⁰

In Cambridge in May he wrote the story "That in Aleppo Once . . .," which depicts the kind of hellish wait in the south of France for a passage to America that he had heard about from his New York friends. An émigré writer who has just reached New York from Marseilles and Nice writes to "Dear V.," another émigré writer already settled for several years in America, and recounts his brief and abysmal marriage, more or less synchronous with his attempt to extricate himself and his young wife from Europe. The horrendous shufflings of papers and shuntings of people in the rush for exit visas become mixed up with his wife's disappearances and reappearances and her versions and revisions of what she and the men she has been with have been up to. He would like to believe the recent past has all been a protracted nightmare, but its rhythms are the inexorable rhythms of reality. The letter ends with the pathetic cry the betrayed husband makes to V., asking him to retell his story—as if an artistic shape will allay the private horror of jealousy, the public horror of the refugee. But recalling that Othello had asked, just before stabbing himself, for *his* story to be told, the letter-writer recoils: "Somewhere, somehow, I have made some fatal mistake. . . . It may all end in *Aleppo* if I am not careful. Spare me, V.: you would load your dice with an unbearable implication if you took that for a title."¹¹

III

During the spring Nabokov had continued to dictate the Gogol book to his wife. At the end of May he sent the typescript to James Laughlin:

I have just mailed you my "Gogol through the Looking-Glass."

This little book has cost me more trouble than any other I have composed. The reason is clear: I had first to create Gogol (translate him) and then discuss him (translate my Russian ideas about him). The recurrent jerk of switching from one rhythm of work to the other has quite exhausted me. The book has taken me exactly one year to write. I never would have accepted your suggestion to do it had I known how many gallons of brain-blood it would absorb; nor would you have made the suggestion had you known how long you would have to wait. . . .

There are probably some slight slips of the pen here and there. I would like to see the Englishman who could write a book on Shakespeare in Russian. I am very weak, smiling a weak smile, as I lie in my private maternity ward, and expect roses.¹²

Unable to face another summer of goldenrod in Vermont, and anxious to hunt butterflies out West, Nabokov had asked Laughlin if he and his family could stay in Laughlin's hotel, Alta Lodge, Utah. Expecting that the hotel would be empty because of the war, Laughlin was glad to rent out a room, even at a cheap rate. On June 22 the Nabokovs set off by train for Chicago and Salt Lake City. Alta was a ski lodge an hour's drive from Salt Lake City up into the Wasatch Mountains, where it nestled at 8,600 feet on the site of a former mining camp. Nabokov loved the area's landscape, its remoteness, its pioneer past: "the tapering lines of firs on the slopes amid a greyish green haze of aspens"; the thought that twenty years earlier "this place was a Roaring Gulch with goldiggers plugging each other in saloons" just as in Mayne Reid.¹³

For Nabokov, Utah was a fortunate choice: one of the few states in which little butterfly collecting had been done, and with mountain ranges isolated by deserts and therefore likely to have evolved new species. Despite a severe climate with icy winds and noisy thunderstorms, he would walk along the valleys and mountain slopes, whenever the sun came out, from twelve to eighteen miles a day, clad only in shorts and tennis shoes, offering a generous target for gadflies. He wanted to rediscover the haunts of *melissa annetta*, a long-lost subspecies of the *Lycaeides* genus that he had been working on the previous winter, and with the help of nine-year-old Dmitri, he found it on lupine among firs on both sides of the Little Cottonwood River, not far from Alta. Once he invited Laughlin on a collecting hike that lasted four and a half hours. The day was hot even at eleven thousand feet. When Nabokov reached the timberline, he decided to investigate some promising meadows at the base of the final peak. He had no interest in ascending higher, where his butterfly net would hinder

him as he climbed on barren rock, but Laughlin headed up to the top of the peak and there put Nabokov's name in the book, much to the latter's annoyance.¹⁴

At the American Museum of Natural History, Nabokov had become good friends with J. H. McDunnough, the then doyen of American lepidopterists and author of the 1938 *Check List of the Lepidoptera of Canada and the United States*. McDunnough had a particular interest in a family of moths known as the pugs. At night on the brilliantly illuminated plate-glass windows of the Alta Lodge lounge, Nabokov collected for his friend all the unfamiliar pugs he could find. He sent McDunnough his catches, which yielded two species so rare that his captures were designated as type specimens, and two entirely new species, one of which McDunnough gratefully named in his honor *Eupithecia nabokovi*.¹⁵

Nabokov had rarely felt so good, and as would happen so often in summers to come, the physical well-being and the excitement of chase and capture greatly stimulated his writing. His new novel—eventually to be called *Bend Sinister*—began to take firmer shape. He also discussed with Laughlin the manuscript of his Gogol book. In fact he later misremembered having written the book there, where his only references were a fat, disintegrating, antediluvian volume of Gogol's works, a particularly Gogolesque mayor of the neighboring mining town, and a hash of facts gathered "the Lord knows where" in the days of his omnivorous youth.¹⁶

His relationship with Laughlin had already become strained: as he wrote to Wilson, "the landlord and the poet are fiercely competing in Laughlin—with the first winning by a neck."¹⁷ Laughlin explained that he thought the book needed more basic information: plot outlines, a straightforward summary of Gogol's life, a list of recommended reading. Nabokov would eventually oblige in an offhanded way, but only after adding to the book a marvelous final chapter so stylized and absurd many readers have mistaken it for fiction:

—"Well," said my publisher . . .

A delicate sunset was framed in a golden gap between gaunt mountains. The remote rims of the gap were eyelashed with firs and still further, deep in the gap itself, one could distinguish the silhouettes of other, lesser and quite ethereal, mountains. We were in Utah, sitting in the lounge of an Alpine hotel. The slender aspens on the near slopes and the pale pyramids of ancient mine dumps took advantage of the plateglass window to participate silently in our talk. . . .

—"Well," said my publisher,—"I like it—but I do think the student ought to be told what it is all about."

I said . . .

—"No,"—he said,—“I don’t mean that. I mean the student ought to be told more about Gogol’s books. I mean the *plots*. He would want to know what those books are *about*.”

I said . . .

—"No you have not,"—he said.—“I have gone through it carefully and so has my wife, and we have not found the plots.”¹⁸

IV

Back in Cambridge in early September, after a return train trip complicated by wartime conditions, Nabokov once again began to teach an informal, extracurricular Russian-language course at Wellesley. This time the one class of twenty-five or so contained a good many staff members and faculty wives. Nabokov was an entertainer and a showman who still managed to impart the necessary information—and some of his enthusiasms. He spent a whole hour talking about Russian sounds and synesthesia, and by the end of the discussion had people agreeing that the letter *x* was the color of shiny tin. Before introducing something new, a long silence would fall as he stood, head bowed, fiddling with the chalk. “I have now something very sad to tell you,” he would murmur, raising his eyes. “We have, in Russian, what we call the instrumental case, and it has different endings that one must memorize. But after you have learned these, you will know practically all there is to know about Russian.”

One student recorded at the time his playful, coaxing manner:

“Do you know the Russian word for ‘nice’? No? Surely we learned it last time.” Whatever the word is, no matter how obscure, he is always sure we learned it last time. “Then I shall tell you. It’s m-ee-la. Lovely word, meela. Beautiful word.” . . . He repeats the Russian several times, musing over it to himself, writes it on the board, then suddenly wheeling around, asks worriedly, “Do you like it? It’s really a lovely word. Do you like it?” . . .

He proceeds to correcting the exercises. . . . “Here we go!” and crashes into the first sentence. The students gasp, unable to find any resemblance at all between this torrent of guttural and rolling sound and the letters printed neatly on their papers. He looks up, startled by the dismay on the faces, and shouts, “What is wrong? Don’t you all have that?” Striding fiercely to the nearest student, he peers at her notebook. “I-yi-yi-yi-yi, no-no!” He stares unbelievably at another book. “But what vile ‘ch’s’!” He pounces on a piece of chalk and writes the character

in a slow, careful hand, then gazes at it, impressed by the beauty of the letter.

The lesson proceeds. After reading the simple, English sentences in dramatic, dashing tone, he follows them with remarks in an undertone, such as, "How am I supposed to know 'Where is the book?' " Later he announces, "And now we come to the saddest story ever told, 'She is here. He is there.' " . . . He wonders why the author has persisted in referring to "the brother who plays the organ" and tells us of an exciting sentence in the grammar which asserts that "Those uncles are crossing these rivers."

. . . He asks us to read aloud in Russian—"Aloud" proves to be three brave souls muttering under their breath in a confused jumble. After the sentence has fallen, mutilated, he sighs rapturously, "So good to hear Russian spoken again! I am practically back in Moscow"

—a city where he had never been, and whose accent he deplored.¹⁹

During the fall Nabokov added to his *Nikolay Gogol* the publisher-author dialogue and a colorful chronology of Gogol's life, and also sent Laughlin the completed manuscript of his translations of the Russian poets. Relations between them remained fraught, however, and when Edmund Wilson suggested to Nabokov they coauthor a book on Russian literature for Doubleday for an advance ten times as large as Laughlin's—Wilson would provide the introductory essays, Nabokov the translations—Nabokov naturally jumped at the chance. Late in November he had his upper teeth removed and a "tip-top plap-plopping plate" fitted, and before visiting the Wilsons in Wellfleet for a weekend at the beginning of December jokingly warned them they might not identify him: "I hope you will recognize me—I shall carry your telegram in my hand." Largely because Wilson moved on to new interests over the next few years, nothing ever came of their projected collaboration.²⁰

From the fall of 1943 to the spring of 1944, Nabokov spent most of his time on lepidoptera. After publishing his first major paper on the genus *Lycaeides*, he was elected to the Cambridge Entomological Society. Some members regarded Nabokov as "not professional" as an entomologist. In certain senses of course this was true. He never earned a living solely as an entomologist, and he had neither a Ph.D. in biology, with all the grounding that would have provided in genetics, biochemistry, evolutionary biology, and population biology, nor the detailed understanding of other insect groups—bees, ants, flies, beetles, and so on—that professional entomologists were expected to have, although they might specialize in only one group. On the other hand, because he focused his attention on one order,

lepidoptera, or rather on one division within the order (rhopalocera, butterflies but not moths), he knew as much as anyone about the butterfly species of the world, their ecology, distribution, taxonomy, and morphology. He attended meetings of the Entomological Society faithfully, and his wide knowledge of his one field made it possible for him to contribute in others. When for instance someone presented a paper on Southern Hemisphere coleoptera (beetles), Nabokov could suggest interesting parallels between Australasian or South American coleoptera and what he knew of the lepidoptera of these regions. He himself presented a paper on the species concept, insisting, against Ernst Mayr's *Systematics and the Origin of Species* (1943), on the primacy of morphology rather than "population" in any definition of species.²¹

He had a keen amateur interest in birds, trees, shrubs, and flowers. In *The Gift* he had made Count Godunov-Cherdyntsev, though a single-minded lepidopterist, bring back from Central Asia for other naturalist friends a snake, an extraordinary bat, even a whole carpet of alpine vegetation, but above his own bench at the M.C.Z. he had pinned a *Punch* cartoon of a man with a butterfly net in the Gobi desert, and in the distance a tyrannosaurus attacking another dinosaur: "This is all very interesting, but I must remember I'm a specialist in butterflies."²² Since he had a limited amount of time to indulge in an almost unpaid profession, he gauged his time and capacities carefully. To arrive swiftly at the exhilarations of innovative research he had to specialize narrowly, focusing not merely on the blues but now on one genus, *Lycaeides*, within that subfamily.

After sorting out the *Lycaeides* genitalia and in the process building up at the M.C.Z. the most representative series of American *Lycaeides* in the world, he now turned to their wing markings. With his customary love of detail, he would not settle at the level of precision Schwanwitsch and others had already reached in lepidopterological description, but discovered that the minute scales on each wing were organized in rows radiating out from the base of the wing. This became his second major principle of broad application: by counting the scale rows—something that had never been done before—he could provide a system for specifying with the utmost exactitude the position of any marking on a butterfly wing. Though the technique has not been widely applied since Nabokov's time, one leading lepidopterist well acquainted with Nabokov's work, Charles Remington of Yale, is certain that it will become much more common in the future. It allowed Nabokov to reach new conclusions about the evolution of butterfly wing markings—that the apparent stripes on *Lycaeides* wings evolved not as stripes but by the fusion of initially discrete

dots—and hence about the relationship of closely allied species. In the excitement of discovery, Nabokov looked forward to writing a monograph of 250 pages on the *Lycaeides* group.²³

V

At the end of 1943 he composed a second long Russian poem, "Parizhskaya poema" ("The Paris Poem"). Its thoroughly unsettling opening reflects, as Nabokov explained, "the chaotic, inarticulate agitation when only the rhythm of the future work, but not its direct sense, glimmers in the poet's consciousness." Lines stagger into lilting life, with a shimmer of sense running through a couplet or two, only for meaning to fade, and let the scene behind start to show through: a Russian poet in his room or wandering through Paris at night, his consciousness dispersed, his self scattered. The poem rises on a note of exaltation and collapses again, and only at the end does the poet's lyric voice find command of its material, spurning the desolate fragmentation of all that has gone before and proclaiming a unity and power in life, a mastery and transcendence of the self.²⁴

Early in January 1944, Nabokov wrote to Wilson: "Véra has had a serious conversation with me in regard to my novel. Having sulkily pulled it out from under my butterfly manuscripts I discovered two things, first that it was good, and second that the beginning some twenty pages at least could be typed and submitted. This will be done speedily." It would not be the last time Véra Nabokov would nudge her husband back from good work—lepidoptery, translation—to better. Nabokov finished the first four chapters of the novel in an exhausting burst and sent them off to Doubleday.²⁵

For the next few months, literary and lepidopterological work followed each other in spasms. Later in life Nabokov would claim at one time that "the pleasure and rewards of literary inspiration are nothing beside the rapture of discovering a new organ under the microscope or an undescribed species on a mountainside," and at another, that "the miniature hooks of a male butterfly are nothing in comparison to the eagle claws of literature which tear at me day and night." Both passions were too intense for him to resist for long. At the end of January he returned "with relief" to his *Lycaeides*, and even thought briefly of revising Holland's *Butterfly Book*, the only book that attempted to represent all the butterflies of North America. He realized the cost of his craving for the excitement of research: "The appalling condition of my purse . . . is my own fault, i.e. I am devoting too much time to entomology (up to 14 hours per day) and although

I am doing in this line something of far-reaching scientific importance I sometimes feel like a drunkard who in his moments of lucidity realizes that he is missing all sorts of wonderful opportunities."²⁶

He was still teaching his after-hours Russian-language course at Wellesley, although since fewer students had been able to spare time for another noncredit course in the second semester, staff members—professors of French and Latin and English, and one research librarian—now predominated in the class. Hannah French, the research librarian, remembers Nabokov staying out in the hall smoking until the last possible moment before class. Once, she recalls, "he came in from his train ride from Boston to Wellesley telling of a conversation he had had with a fellow passenger in fairly rapid Russian, challenging us to interpret it." Or he would tell stories in Russian, with many pantomimed gestures, which the class desperately needed, since they recognized only a word or two.²⁷

A single guest lecture at Yale in March—on Russian literature rather than elementary Russian language—brought Nabokov as much money as a term of these extracurricular Wellesley classes. But they were not altogether a waste of effort. Already it had become obvious that the Soviet Union would be one of the two leading powers in the postwar world, and in March, Wellesley College decided to offer a course in elementary Russian for credit in the 1944–1945 school year, with Mr. Nabokov as sole instructor.²⁸

In the absence of Mildred McAfee, the college president, now in Washington as head of the WAVES, the most powerful figure at Wellesley was the Dean of Instruction, Ella Keats Whiting. She suggested to Nabokov that in designing the course he consult other universities, such as Harvard, to see what methods were in use there.²⁹ The suggestion was an unfortunate one. Months earlier Nabokov had written to his friend Roman Grynberg complaining about the teaching of Russian in the universities in the area, and added that he would like to write something on the subject. Leading the flock of his *bêtes noires* was the head of Russian at Harvard, Samuel Hazzard Cross, "who knows only the middle of Russian words and completely ignores prefixes and endings." Nabokov may not have written anything about Cross, but he certainly retold often the story about his friend Karpovich catching Cross, as Nabokov put it, "white-handed": "Karpovich happened to enter a class in which Cross had just finished the lesson; upon seeing Karpovich, he lunged toward the blackboard but did not succeed in completely erasing with the palm of an apprehensive hand the example of grammar which Karpovich managed to see: *on ego udaril s palkoi*, he hit him in the company of a stick, instead of simply [*on ego udaril*] *palkoi* [with a