

KEYS TO *THE GIFT*

Yuri Leving

A Guide to
Nabokov's Novel

Boston
2011

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*To Ella,
Lola and Leva (Arieh Levi),
for their love and patience*

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How to Use This Book

“Where are the keys? Keys, my keys!”

Alexander Pushkin,
The Covetous Knight (1830)

To critically interpret a text means to read it in order to discover, along with our reactions to it, something about its nature. To use a text means to start from it in order to get something else, even accepting the risk of misinterpreting it from the semantic point of view. If I tear out the pages of my Bible to wrap my pipe tobacco in them, I am using this Bible, but it would be daring to call me a textualist—even though I am, if not a strong pragmatist, certainly a very pragmatic person.

Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*

— 1 —

Imagine purchasing an expensive coffee maker without a user’s manual, or trying to run an outdated word processing program on a brand new iPad. You would probably be able to produce a simple cup of coffee to sip while gazing at the green block letters on your screen, but what is the point of this elementary task if the machines are designed for excellence? Reading Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Dar* (*The Gift*) without a critical guide is comparable to the unwelcome prospect of trying to enjoy Joyce’s *Ulysses* without a single line of commentary. Current English-language editions of *The Gift*, however, seem to produce just this sort of blundering. *The Gift* is a difficult novel, and requires an especially meticulous and expansive scholarly guide.

My own reading of the novel was not easy and, therefore, typical. The first encounter occurred in the early nineties, when an old friend presented me with a small copy of the novel published in the provincial Russian town of Omsk (much to my chagrin, I later discovered that this particular edition was peppered with monstrous errata). At the time, I was studying abroad in Israel and could have afforded the hardbound 1975 Ardis edition, lovingly printed on vellum paper, but the tiny red paperback easily carried in a pocket served well for an undergraduate student working odd jobs. A few times I glanced through the opening pages of the book, but could hardly force myself beyond that point. My attention dwindled easily; I found the painfully long sentences irritating. Given the abundance of parenthetical digressions, by the time I reached the end of a paragraph I would often forget how it had begun, which provoked multiple readings. I tried to cheat by snatching fragments at random, but this grew tiresome and only made me want to put the book aside. I felt perplexed. I liked Nabokov's other novels, but *The Gift* was somehow different.

I remember how I tried to engage with the fourth chapter, Chernyshevski's biography, while working as a guard at the maternity ward in the Hadassah Ein-Kerem hospital. Unfortunately, the moments of peace between attacks from irritated expectant fathers and importunate relatives were too brief to allow time for the novel to truly beguile me. I will refrain, however, from drawing any conclusions or seeking symbolism in the fact that I was impregnated with the seed of this book while working at the labor ward, especially since my devotion was not then carried to full term, as I did not finish the novel.

It is possible that the very structure of *The Gift* discouraged me in my half-hearted courtship and challenged me to hold out for a true romance. As ironic as this may sound, the first spark flared during my own honeymoon, which was not even remotely romantic. When I had just returned from a summer of military training, my new bride and I, finding ourselves short of money, decided to spend the month after our wedding at an Israeli kibbutz, where we harvested apples next to the sloping Jerusalem Mountains. For some reason, I decided to shove Nabokov's misleadingly petite book into my bag. Along with another young couple, we shared a room divided by an oversized wardrobe that barely blocked a third of the space needed for privacy; for the rest we strung makeshift curtains. As in the Shchyogolev apartment in Berlin, one could easily hear the neighbors' toilet splashes (and not only that), and right outside the entrance to our dwelling was an improvised zoo complete with garrulous monkeys, a couple of goats, and a flabby iguana.

Despite (and perhaps because of) these eclectic circumstances, I found myself unexpectedly captivated by the world of *The Gift*. I began to immerse myself in

it as soon as the hard days of physical labor had ended, lying on my bed or on the ground under the pomegranate bushes and . . . feeling increasingly happy. I stepped into Zina and Fyodor's universe as imperceptibly as the protagonist of Nabokov's novel crossed the realities between his own dreams and daily Berlin life, just as Godunov-Cherdyntsev Senior entered the rainbow. Inevitably came the afternoon when I finished the book. I closed my eyes, refusing to believe that the novel I had hungered for, that I had wanted so much to continue devouring, could end so suddenly.

As often happens, I hesitated for a long time to analyze my feelings rationally and examine the source of my delight under any sort of intellectual magnifying glass. Then, in 1996, Professor Roman Timenchik (my beloved teacher at the Hebrew University) offered for the very first time his graduate seminar entitled "The Russian Nabokov."

That first semester we only read about twenty-five pages of the opening chapter (the entire novel is over three hundred pages). Usually we looked at several sentences per class, but in the case of some particularly complex constructions, we might spend up to two sessions on a single phrase. Practicing the method of close reading (and our readings were very close indeed!) we brainstormed about the text. We began by discussing a simple understanding of the pragmatic message of each sentence, then moved toward dissecting the syntax, before finally attempting to crack the metatextual codes and track down the implicit literary allusions. I audited the same course the following year and our progress turned out to be even more modest: we managed to get through only the first fifteen pages. By the time I left Israel, I had attended Timenchik's seminar three times (twice from start to finish and then less regularly in the third year due to other commitments), and our intense discussions almost never duplicated the debates of the previous years, proving to be just as interesting, stimulating, and refreshing.

During the seminars, some of us questioned whether Nabokov could have possibly kept *consciously* in his mind such a multiplicity of allusions and reminiscences, fusing them in packed images that so deftly entrapped his readers and laying semantically explosive mines in the dense field of his prose. Could our overzealous interpretations lead us to unintentionally presumptuous fallacies? One of the puzzled students, unable to restrain himself, once exclaimed: "But even if half of what we discover here is true, then Nabokov's mind had to be a kind of computer!"

Timenchik instantly retorted: "Then a computer he *was*."

— 2 —

The structure of the present book follows the conventions of current literary guides.

In Chapter One the reader is taken on a historical journey from the creation of the novel through its publication and beyond. There I bring together the scattered data pertaining to writing and publishing the novel, from its serialization in the émigré press to the most recent editions. Before the present book, this work had yet to be done in a systematic way, though I greatly appreciate the field work of many colleagues who over the years have studied and copiously annotated the archival discoveries, published Nabokov correspondence, and other documents relevant to the history of *The Gift*. To this I add my own research on Nabokov's original manuscripts and archival materials at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., and in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. From issues related to the manuscript and paleography (sample textological analysis will be provided in the fifth chapter of the monograph) I move to discussion of the phantom “second part” of *The Gift*.

It is almost impossible, especially for a beginner, to fully appreciate *The Gift* and its numerous subtleties without some basic knowledge of Russian and European (German, in particular) history and artistic culture of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter Two, using a montage of material, is designed to provide the necessary introduction: a series of brief sections sketches Chernyshevski's Russia of the late nineteenth century, followed by excursions into the life and mores of pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg and the Russian émigré community in Berlin between the two World Wars. This historical milieu will be familiar terrain for Slavists and native speakers of Russian, but should provide those who are less conversant in Russian culture with much of the essential data necessary for a deeper understanding of Nabokov's work. I have tried to gather and arrange the available sources in such a way as to introduce readers to the most important landmarks of the intricate landscape against which *The Gift* swiftly and majestically unfolds.

The guide proceeds then with two further parts on “Structure” and “Style” (Chapters Three and Four, respectively). The former outlines the basic components of *The Gift* (its plot and characters) and reconstructs the internal chronology of the novel. Other literary elements are explored in such sections as “Setting” and “Themes.” The latter chapter deals with “Method,” “Points of View,” and “Form.” Intertextuality is one of the main principles of poetic structure in Nabokov's oeuvre and it is treated in a separate section of Chapter Four.

Without annotating the entire text of *The Gift*, Chapter Five, nonetheless, discusses the general principles for providing commentary on the novel and

provides a variety of examples of the novel's challenging riddles and their solutions. The history of the novel's English translation is covered in Chapter Six.

It is widely understood that *The Gift* provokes mixed reactions from readers. Although the number of responses to the work during Nabokov's lifetime, especially at the time of its initial Russian-language publication during 1937–38, was limited—what material there is has still not been studied sufficiently and remains somewhat opaque. A detailed account of the history of critical reception of the novel is given in Chapter Seven. In this last chapter of the book I mainly describe and quote publications prior to the author's death; after this, the survey becomes less comprehensive since the more recent works are readily available to anyone interested in retrieving the full texts.

The guide ends with an appendix, "Firing Practice to *The Gift*" (I borrow Fyodor's own definition of his work on Chernyshevski as preparation for the "real" novel, that is *The Gift* itself¹). For the first time, it introduces the English-language reader to a lengthy letter written by Nabokov in 1937 to his friend and former classmate at Tenishev School, Samuil Rozov, who later moved to Palestine. From a literary point of view, this letter (kept by the Rozov family for three generations now) is probably one of the most valuable documents in the entire corpus of Nabokov's European correspondence, excluding family letters. It offers deep insight into his intimate world and his artistic laboratory, and demonstrates that the author provided a generous autobiographical layer for Fyodor's childhood (as described in the first chapter of *The Gift*). With the kind permission of both heirs, Dmitri Nabokov and Arie Rozov, the publication of the original Russian document was made possible after two successive summers of research at the Central State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg.

The other appendices and indexes (*Dramatis personae*, *Flora and fauna*, *Color distribution*, and *Toponymy*) are available as a supplement to this printed edition at the website (www.keystogift.com), which is designed to provide the reader with a quick and convenient reference regarding various technical aspects of the narrative.

— 3 —

The next step in the study of *The Gift* should be the publication of a facsimile of the manuscript along with variant texts placed on the opposite pages (the kind of work that has been done for other English and Russian classics). The necessity of a variorum edition of *The Gift*, akin to the authoritative editions

¹ Vladimir Nabokov. *The Gift*. New York: Vintage International, 1991, 196. Throughout the book I refer to this edition by a letter G following the page number.

in series such as The Library of America, Pléiade, or Literaturnye Pamiatniki (Literary Monuments) is self-evident. However, its implementation will most likely take years of collaborative scholarly effort. The current study is something of a compromise: an introductory attempt to gather comprehensive data on the novel from a variety of available sources. Using both referential and analytical approaches, it merely paves the way to future academic editions and invites more extensive work on what can truly be called one of the masterpieces of twentieth century modernist literature.

The rare emotional catharsis that accompanied my first serious reading of *The Gift* is unforgettable, and it is for this bliss that I am grateful to Nabokov. Below is my humble attempt to look beyond *the skyline of the page*, to catch, weigh and deconstruct the very *haze*, which cannot *terminate the phrase*.

Halifax, 2010

Acknowledgments

The goal of this book is to systemize in a coherent and clear way the main data available on Nabokov's *The Gift*, from passing mentions in private correspondence to newspaper reviews and scholarly articles accumulated during the seven decades since its first appearance in print, and to make the novel ultimately accessible to any interested reader without prior deep knowledge of Russian history or literature.

I have tried not to burden the reader with too many references to sources; however, I have felt it appropriate to include a bibliography of critical works at the end of each chapter and to credit the researchers who first came up with original answers to the riddles of *The Gift*, although since so much has been written on the novel in the past twenty years there are inevitable repetitions in some articles. And if at times the book reads like a collage of scholarly citations, it can be said to mimic the very method of Nabokov in his composition of *The Gift*; in my case this can be justified by one simple reason—the guide is an attempt to summarize and serve as a compendium of sorts for the many fine studies of Nabokov's puzzling novel. Unattributed information will, I trust, be uncontroversial, and will derive either from general investigative work or from Nabokov papers in the Library of Congress and Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.

In addition to the published labors of Nabokov scholars I am grateful to many friends and colleagues: Keith Blasing—not just for his help with editing and translation of parts of this manuscript, but also for pulling plums out of a pot-pie of metaphors; John Barnstead for translating Nabokov's letter to Rozov; Frederick White, Olga Gurin, and Dana Dragunoiu for making my English more elastic; Lazar Fleishman for coming up with the idea of this book and Igor Nemirovsky for his patience; Roman Timenchik for being my teacher; Omry Ronen for encyclopedic insights into Nabokov and beyond; Savely Senderovich for ongoing support; Alexander Dolinin for constant inspiration; Leona Toker for serving as

the ideal of an almost legalistic structure of argumentation; Maria Malikova for her sense of elegance and style; Boris Katz for two musical consultations; Norman G. Pereira for preventing me from blunders in sketching Russia's history; Stephen Blackwell for an intellectually charging breakfast in Kyoto; Michael Scammell for a surprisingly candid interview; Michael Katz, the translator of *What to Do?*, for supporting my—still unrealized—project of the annotated English edition of this Nabokov novel; Brendan Rutherford for compiling the index to this book and providing copy-editing; and, finally, to all of the students in my “Nabokov” classes taught at Dalhousie University since 2007, who enthusiastically contributed to the electronic concordance to *The Gift*, an online educational project (www.keystogift.com), which, thanks to Andrei Bashkin, has acquired a sleek skin worthy of competing with high-end 3D computer games.

Without the cooperation of Dmitri Nabokov in giving me access to materials in archives and permission to make use of them, this book would be a much poorer thing. Indeed, the very idea of studying Nabokov could not be imagined without his benign and stimulating presence. I am grateful to Dmitri Vladimirovich and the Nabokov Estate for permission to quote from the writer's works, published and unpublished.

Isaac Gewirtz of the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library and Alice L. Birney of the Manuscript Division at the Library of Congress have greatly facilitated my work with the Nabokov materials.

Parts of this research appeared in *The Nabokovian* (39, 1997; 45, 2000; 48, 2002; 64, 2010); in *The Real Life of Pierre Delalande. Studies in Russian and Comparative Literature to Honor Alexander Dolinin* (Ed. by David M. Bethea, L. Fleishman, and A. Ospovat. Stanford: Stanford Slavic Studies. Vol. 34 (2), 2007); as well as in the *Nabokov Online Journal* (Vol. I, 2007), reprinted by permission.

I am indebted to Alexander Dolinin for reading the draft of this book; his specific comments saved me from a number of errors, while his general observations have helped me to refine the overall thesis. If I have not followed all of his suggestions, the fault is mine alone.

The author of the first ever monograph-length study of the novel, Stephen H. Blackwell, lamented: “What is *The Gift*, which many consider the century's greatest Russian novel? Why is it not automatically included in ‘Great Books’ courses?” His response to his own question was that perhaps it is because of the bizarre sedateness of its plot, the sense that “nothing happens,” or its esoteric focus on artistic creation (Blackwell 1). And even though Nabokov, this “emphatically Eurocentric male writer of aristocratic background and demanding high cultural standards,” has not yet had “a comparable place in academe, for

many reasons, including his inherent difficulty, especially for students who now spend less time reading books than their forebears; his straddling the disciplinary boundaries between English and Russian; and his being deeply unfashionable in an age committed to canonical revisionism and increased attention to women, minorities, the non-Eurocentric and the demotic” (Boyd 32), my hope is that the present guide will make questions such as those above at least more approachable.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which made this research possible.

References

Blackwell, Stephen H. *Zina’s Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov’s Gift*. New York, New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

Boyd, Brian. “Literature, Pattern, Lolita: Or Art, Literature, Science,” *Transitional Nabokov*. Ed. by Duncan White and Will Norman. New York: Peter Lang, 2009: 31-53.

Note on Spellings of Names

Throughout this book I am using the spelling of Russian names based on the Library of Congress system, with the exception of certain conventional departures from that system (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, etc.). However, in order to be consistent with the primary text, I have decided to keep “Chernyshevski,” “Fyodor,” and Nabokov’s other idiosyncratic versions as they appear in the authorized translation of *The Gift*.

THE GIFT: **A BIOGRAPHY OF THE NOVEL**

- 1933 *January*. Nabokov begins gathering materials for what will become his last novel written in Russian.
November 11. Reports to Fondaminsky and Rudnev, the editors of *Sovremennye zapiski* (*Contemporary Annals*), that he is still busy doing preparatory work and has not even begun writing the novel.
- 1934 *January–February*. Composes a short story, “The Circle,” orbiting around the still emerging universe of *The Gift*.
June. Breaks off writing “The Life of Chernyshevski,” a fictional biography of the legendary Russian revolutionary, to switch to the anti-totalitarian novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*, completed in just a few weeks.
- 1935 *June*. Begins Chapter Two of *The Gift* (about the butterfly expeditions into Central Asia).
Late summer. Writes a short autobiographical piece in English.
April. Reads parts of *The Gift* at the home of Iosif Gessen, the former editor of the journal *Pravo* (*Law*) and friend of V. D. Nabokov.
- 1936 *March 15*. Informs Gleb Struve from Berlin that he is back to writing a major novel. Composes lyrical verse that will later be included in the first chapter.
Late spring–summer? Writes a few chapters (all lost) of an autobiography in English.
August. Begins Chapter One.
October 2. Confides to Mikhail Karpovich that the work is so intensive that he feels aches in his writing hand.

- 1937 *January*. A public reading of two excerpts from *The Gift* in Paris.
April. Chapter One of *The Gift* is published in the literary magazine *Sovremennye zapiski*, though remaining chapters remain incomplete.
July. Moves to Cannes.
August 6. Proposes to Rudnev, the editor of *Sovremennye zapiski*, that Chapter Four (“The Life of Chernyshevski”) be published instead of Chapter Two, which is not yet ready.
August 10-16: Exchanges letters with Fondaminsky in which he expresses his anger at the journal’s unwillingness to publish Chapter Four.
September 4. Writes a private letter to Samuil Rozov in Palestine that contains many autobiographical glimpses related to the novel in progress (reprinted in the Appendix).
Mid-October. Moves to Menton. Works on Chapter Three.
- 1938 *January*. Completes *The Gift*.
Spring. Sends the manuscript to Altagracia de Jannelli, his American literary agent, who forwards it to Bobbs-Merrill publishing house for consideration.
Early summer. Critic Alexander Nazaroff submits the first written review of the novel to Bobbs-Merrill: “In its general type, *Gift* sharply differs from that which hitherto was the common run of Nabokoff’s novels . . . *Gift* is not a realistic novel. I even am not sure that it can be called a novel at all. It is an ultra-sophisticated and modernist piece of introspective, almost ‘non-subjective’ writing which, in composition, may be likened to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.”
July 14. Comments to Altagracia de Jannelli: “On the whole I rather liked N[azaroff]’s description of *The Gift*, although it is very superficial — there is a lot more in my book both for the connoisseur and the lay reader . . . My style and methods have nothing in common with Joyce (though I greatly appreciate *Ulysses*).”
October. Moves to Paris. Final installment of *The Gift* appears in *Sovremennye zapiski*.
November. Abram Kagan, co-owner of the émigré publishing house “Petropolis,” negotiates to have the novel published in two volumes.
- 1939 *May 28*. Sergei Rachmaninoff becomes involved in a possible publication of the book.
Fall. The outbreak of the World War in Europe ruins the prospects of publishing *The Gift* as a monograph for the foreseeable future.
December 31. One of the final issue of the émigré Parisian newspaper *Bodrost’* (*Cheerfulness*) features an extract from the novel’s omitted chapter (“The Arrest of Chernyshevski”).

- 1940 Contemplates writing the continuation of *The Gift*, but completes only a draft of addendum on lepidoptera as well as a rough plan for the second part, which was never to be finished.
May. The Nabokovs move to the United States, leaving most of the writer's archive in Europe.
- 1941 *July 25*. Suggests that Peter Pertzoff, who earlier translated a number of his short stories from Russian to English, undertake the translation of *The Gift*, granting him exclusive rights for the project until December 1, 1941. Pertzoff's translation was never completed.
- 1942–1943 Active efforts to elicit interest in *The Gift* on the part of American publishing industry. Among the potential translators—writers and scholars—Yarmolinsky, Wilson, Werth, Muchnic, and Guernsey.
- 1944 *May*. Discusses with Zenzinov a prospective literary evening in New York and entertains the idea of publishing *The Gift* independently.
- 1945 *October 25*. Véra Nabokov inquires with Zenzinov again: “The last thing I would like to ask you, concerns the odds of publishing *The Gift*. We want to print it ourselves.”
- 1951 *July 18*. Mark Aldanov recommends that Nabokov's novel be published by a new émigré Russian press, the Chekhov Publishing House, in New York.
- 1952 *April*. Reads the proofs of the first Russian-language edition of his novel.
Early May. The Chekhov Press issues *The Gift*.
May 27. Edmund Wilson receives a complimentary copy of the novel, but apparently never reads (or finishes reading) it.
July. Review of the Russian edition of *Dar* in the émigré journal, *Posev*.
- 1958–1959 Donates manuscript materials relating to *The Gift* to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.
- 1961 *February*. Anna Feigin, Véra's cousin, recommends Michael Scammell as the translator of *The Gift* into English.
July–August. Scammell finishes translating Chapters Four and Five. Véra writes Scammell to say that her husband is “amazed at the speed with which you work.”

- 1962 Praises the forthcoming English edition of *The Gift* in an interview to BBC: "It is the longest, I think the best, and the most nostalgic of my Russian novels."
- 1963 *March–April*. Two excerpts from *The Gift* appear in English translation in *The New Yorker* magazine.
May 27. *The Gift* is published in the United States while the Nabokovs travel in Europe.
July–December. Over 100 reviews of *The Gift* appear in various periodicals. The reception is mixed: most critics cautiously praise the novel but also project that it won't repeat the success of *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*.
September. Unequivocally claims in an interview for the *Television 13* educational program in New York: "My best Russian novel is a thing called, in English, *The Gift*. My two best American ones are *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*."
- 1967 *Fall*. Gallimard in Paris publishes the French translation of *The Gift* by Raymond Girard.
- 1975 *Spring*. Ardis Publishers begins reprinting Nabokov's Russian works, including *The Gift*.
- 1979 The first scholarly paper on *The Gift* is published in the USSR: its author, Mikhail Lotman, pretends that he is writing about an obscure Russian poet named Godunov-Cherdyntsev, and does not mention the still forbidden Nabokov's name.
- 1988 *March*. The Soviet magazine *Ural* (3-6) begins a serialized publication of what is announced as an unabridged version of *The Gift* (it includes the controversial Chapter Four, as well as some omissions and alterations).
- 1989 The novel is printed in a book edition in the Soviet city of Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg) in the Urals. A Russian Americanist scholar A. Zverev contributes an introduction to this edition, whose print run amounts to a quarter of a million copies.
- 1990 The Berg Collection (New York Public Library) acquires materials relating to the translation of *The Gift* into English, among other Nabokov's manuscripts.
Two different annotated Russian editions of *Dar* are published for the first time with extensive commentary (by O. Dark and A. Dolinin respectively).

- 1993 D. Zimmer presents his German translation of the novel (the Rowohlt edition contains commentary translated from Russian with a few additions).
- 1999 *Spring*. \$35,000 is the listing price of the inscribed edition of *The Gift* (New York: The Chekhov Publishing House, 1952) for sale by the American book dealer Glenn Horowitz (lot N° 71 in the catalogue).
- 2000 *January*. St. Petersburg publishing house Symposium produces the first copyrighted post-Soviet edition of *The Gift*, by arrangement with the Estate of Vladimir Nabokov, incorporating Alexander Dolinin's thorough commentary in Volume 4.
April. Publication of "Father's Butterflies" in *The Atlantic Monthly*; the same magazine had introduced Nabokov to his first extended audience in the English-speaking world more than half a century earlier.
July. The first monograph-length study of the novel, *Zina's Paradox*, by Stephen H. Blackwell appears in print.
- 2002 *Summer—winter*. Exhibitions devoted to the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Gift* held at the Russian National Library (St. Petersburg) and the Library of Russia Abroad (Moscow); Dr. Galina Glushanok, curator (concept and design). It features émigré editions of the novel as well as samizdat copies, serialized excerpts, and reproductions of the correspondence between Nabokov and Scammell pertaining to the translation of *The Gift*.
- 2007 *October*. The launch of the online *Gift Project*—concordance and visual commentary, an English-language scholarly resource featuring concordance, annotations, bibliographic information and abstracts of academic articles devoted to the novel, as well as the covers of international editions and photographic reproductions of various journal publications of the novel.
- 2009 *July*. The manuscript of *The Gift* becomes available for research as part of the Nabokov Collection in the Library of Congress upon the expiration of the 50 year term during which public access was not allowed.
- 2010 *January*. The Russian-language editions of *The Gift* (Azbooka) begin to include "Father's Butterflies," still without the short story "The Circle," but closer to Nabokov's own master plan for addenda.
April. The second translation of the novel into Japanese comes out (translated from the Russian by Mitsuyoshi Numano; the earlier version was based on the English translation).

June. *The Gift* is being rapidly re-discovered by readers and scholars alike: the latest printed monograph devoted to the writer, Eric Naiman's *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), features a chapter entitled "Blackwell's *Paradox* and Fyodor's *Gift*," which ends as follows:

The reward for reading *The Gift* well is the absence of the anxiety that necessarily characterizes "good reading" of other novels by Nabokov. The 'price' is a loss of self. As Zina says in the novel's final quoted line of dialogue, uttered as she and Fyodor prepare to leave a café, "We have to pay. Call him over." (178)

2011 *December*. *The Gift* in the English translation is to be released as an unabridged audiobook by *Brilliance Audio* on CD. Reader to be announced.

CHAPTER ONE

COMPOSITION AND PUBLICATION



WRITING

The Gift was an entirely new kind of a novel and composing it required new skills and a much longer timeframe even from an author as productive as Sirin (Vladimir Nabokov's pen name during his career as a Russian-language writer). When, in late 1933, Vadim Rudnev, an editor of the journal *Sovremennye zapiski* (*Contemporary Annals*) and former political activist, heard from a mutual friend, Ilya Fondaminsky, that Nabokov had started working on a new novel, he inquired as to whether it would be possible to examine the manuscript for consideration. "Unfortunately, I am unable to oblige you," Nabokov politely declined, "for, as I mentioned to Ilya Isidorovich [Fondaminsky] the other day, I have not even begun writing the new novel. For the past half year I have been busy doing preparatory work, and this work is not yet finished. I apologize for the somewhat belated reply" (November 11, 1933; Nabokov Papers in the University of Illinois Archives; trans. by Gene Barabtarlo). It was logical for Rudnev to ask this of Nabokov, who was a regular contributor to that journal and a rising star in Russian émigré literature. Ironically, it will be the same Rudnev who tried to secure the novel in progress for *Sovremennye zapiski* who would reject *The Gift* in its final form four years later.

A few months later, by mid-1934, Nabokov was hard at work on writing Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's fictional biography of the nineteenth century Russian revolutionary and philosopher, Nikolai Chernyshevski (Boyd, *Russian Years* 416). Shortly before that, a rough draft of Chernyshevski's novel *What Is To Be Done?*, lacking sections of Chapter Five and all of Chapter Six (discovered in the archive of the Peter and Paul Fortress), had been published in 1929; it is possible that this publication reached Nabokov and attracted his attention to the vagaries of the controversial book.¹

¹ We know almost all the major sources that Nabokov studied for Chapter Four. Beside Chernyshevski's complete works, two books by Steklov and one by Volynsky (they are mentioned in the text), he used a three-volume collection of annotated biographical materials edited by N.A. Alekseev, M.N. Chernyshevski and S.N. Chernov (*N.G. Chernyshevskii*.

Nabokov had not yet composed Chapter Five of *The Gift* when he wrote another novel, *Invitation to a Beheading*. Brian Boyd explains that this brief side project was motivated by Nabokov's research on Chernyshevski, which revealed to him the nightmares of the Russian penal system (Chernyshevski was sentenced to fourteen years of hard labor in Siberia and was forced to undergo a ritual mock execution). After reading all of Chernyshevski's works that he could track down—a feat in itself—Nabokov creatively absorbed the material (“I had to...digest all this my own way, so that now I have heartburn,” as he writes to Khodasevich; April 26, 1934; Boyd, *Russian Years* 406-7). The same letter provides an interesting clue as to why Nabokov would bother spending his time on this seemingly thankless task; every one of Chernyshevski's books, he confesses, was “utterly dead” by the 1930s and Chernyshevski “had less talent than a lot of people, *but more courage than many*... He was thoroughly tormented” (Ibid.).² At the early stage of composition he also confides to his friend Gleb Struve:

The idea of a new novel has germinated with me and it will have direct relation to—guess who?—Chernyshevski! I read his correspondence, *What Is To Be Done?*, etc., etc., and I see this curious gentleman large as life. I hope this little piece of news will amuse you. My book, for certain, will in no way resemble the most insipid and, in my opinion, pseudo-intellectual [*poluintelligentnye*] *biographies romancées* à la [André] Maurois. (August 23, 1933; Struve 251; cf. in *The Gift*: “You know those idiotic ‘*biographies romancées*’ where Byron is coolly slipped a dream extracted from one of his own poems?”; G200)

A year later Nabokov mentioned his work to Struve again: “My Chernyshevski grows up, revolts and, hopefully, will kick the bucket soon” (Ibid.). *The Gift* turned out to be, without a doubt, the most labor-intensive of Nabokov's novels. The author wrote to Vladislav Khodasevich that it was “monstrously difficult,” explaining that he had to undertake Fyodor's research for him before composing the Chernyshevski biography. He tackled that chapter first, establishing a precedent of writing the most difficult sections of a novel before the rest—a practice he would return to for both *Pale Fire* and *Ada*. After completing Fyodor's semi-historical sketch, Nabokov turned back to chapter two in mid-1935 (Boyd, *Russian Years* 419). His aim now was to recreate an account of the life and the Asian journeys of Godunov-Cherdyntsev senior, the protagonist's father. The

Literaturnoe nasledie. Moscow and Leningrad: 1928-1930); a three-volume collection of Chernyshevski's letters from Siberia edited by E.A. Liatsky and annotated by M.N. Chernyshevski (*Chernyshevskii v Sibiri. Perepiska s rodnymi*. Saint Petersburg: 1912-1913), and M. Lemke's book on political trials of the 1860s in Russia: M.K. Lemke. *Politicheskie protsessy v Rossii 1860-kh godov (Po arkhivnym materialam)*. Izd. 2-e. Moscow and Petrograd, 1923.

² Unless specifically mentioned, all italics in quotations are mine.

work with documentary sources for the life of Chernyshevski proved to be useful experience, though Nabokov used totally different material to construct his colorful mosaic of the Asian flora and fauna. Nabokov then directed his attention back to the unseasoned poet, Godunov-Cherdyntsev, whose poems, according to the plan, were to have been interspersed throughout the first chapter of the book (Boyd, *Russian Years* 426). This task required a subtle approach: verses had to present a careful mixture of banal style and epigone lyricism through which Fyodor's future poetic gift could be discerned.

A reading of parts of *The Gift* in April of 1935 at the home of Iosif Gessen — former editor of *Pravo* (*Law*) and a friend of the writer's father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, — received a positive response, as did public readings of excerpts in Paris in late December 1936 and January 1937.

In a letter to Struve (March 15, 1936) Nabokov reported that, as he had resettled in Berlin, he was back to writing *The Gift*. Chapter Four, which would cause him so much trouble later, had been finished, and it is probable that a tentative outline of the third chapter had also been completed. Three and a half years after the work on *The Gift* began, its most challenging parts were ready. The author could now use the drafts (which have not survived) to write out the book in a linear way. Armed with the samples of Fyodor's youthful poetry, Nabokov started putting the novel together on August 23, 1936. This work was so intensive that Nabokov's writing hand soon started aching (as he confided in a letter to Mikhail Karpovich, a historian and an older friend, on October 2, 1936; Boyd 429). By September 1937 Chapters Three and Five existed in draft form; Nabokov continued to revise them while residing at Cannes. After completing Chapter Two he continued straight to Chapter Three.

Around mid-October 1938, Nabokov moved to Menton in the French Riviera (Boyd, *Russian Years* 445). Due to the subtropical climate there, winter is practically unknown in Menton (hotels and villas in this resort, which was popular up until 1914, welcomed rich guests from England, Russia and all over the world during the beautiful mild days of winter). The Nabokovs enjoyed the beautiful sea and the nearby sunny mountains; it was in this garden paradise that the writer concluded the final chapter of *The Gift* in January 1938.

THE MANUSCRIPT

Problems of Paleography

Vladimir Nabokov was extraordinarily careful when making any statements that might provide the casual reader with details about his life as a writer. In the English-language period of his work, he deliberately created a mythologized and

somewhat eccentric picture of his laboratory--index cards kept in shoe boxes. As is well known, Nabokov was skeptical about the possibility of gaining insight into an author's intentions by analyzing his manuscripts. In the introduction to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*, he writes: "An artist should ruthlessly destroy his manuscripts after publication, lest they mislead academic mediocrities into thinking that it is possible to unravel the mysteries of genius by studying cancelled readings. In art, purpose and plan are nothing; only the results count" (Nabokov 1:15). Nevertheless, this conviction did not hinder the author himself (or those close to him) from solicitously preserving his own rough drafts and sketches (for example, for some of his short stories and poems). The accumulated manuscript corpus is fertile soil for studying the creative history of Nabokov's works, his artistic logic and his techniques.

Among the texts that have been preserved, the materials for *The Gift* occupy a special place in the legacy of the author, who considered this novel the culmination and literary peak of his Russian-language career. It is difficult to say at what stage of the novel's development the text available to researchers was written. Nabokov was clearly guided by a definite principle when choosing the materials (of which a significant portion was lost during the German occupation of Paris) to hand over to the state depository for archiving. In several cases, both the rough draft and fair copy of the published work have survived (for example, the drafts of the short story "A Busy Man"). Study and comparison of the different versions make it possible to trace the evolution of the text and the manner in which Nabokov wrote it, supplementing evidence from biographical sources and memoirs.

Iosif Gessen, who knew Nabokov quite well, said of the latter's professional habits (which did change over the course of his life) that he "rewrites his works several times, introducing more and more corrections or changes, and only after this, from his dictation, is the final text hammered out" (Gessen 181). Véra Nabokov, the author's full-time editor, secretary, and archivist throughout his life, typed up his compositions. Nabokov's own numerous statements about his ability to envision the plan of a novel at once and as a whole are famous; this capacity allowed him afterward to gradually implement on paper the plan that he held in his consciousness, as if he were developing camera film. It was just this technique, as Nabokov said, that made it possible for him to start work on any part of the novel, even chronologically nonconsecutive ones, because of the precision with which he had imagined the subject, plot, and composition of the work in process. At the same time, the texts of Nabokov's Russian-period works, in the form in which they have come down to us (in the present instance, we have in mind the conventional linear method of writing them down—that is, with pen on paper, and not in pencil on cards for indexing, as was the case from the mid-1940s onward), form a coherent narrative written from the first to the last line

without any substantial gaps or insertions made at later stages. From the very beginning of his literary career, Nabokov also had the habit, like clockwork, of dating a finished work, and the majority of the Russian-period manuscripts in his archive are just such definitive texts with the date on the last page.

As mentioned above, it is known about *The Gift* that the Chernyshevski chapter and the poems that the author planned to attribute to his main character, Godunov-Cherdyntsev, were written earlier than the rest of the novel. As distinct from an interviewer, a textologist can and should verify the author's version of events by studying the manuscripts. In fact, the archival sources I have examined do not contain any of Nabokov's sketches or outlines for even a single work that contained any kind of preliminary working notes (lists of names for possible characters, plot outlines, and so on). This fact alone, however, should not lead one to conclude that such groundwork for complex plot constructions (with which it must be said that the multilayered novel *The Gift* is assembled) simply did not exist, but only that Nabokov, in keeping with his declared philosophy of creative work, was in fact able to destroy these early materials. In the assessment of Brian Boyd, Nabokov's archival legacy for the most part consists of either fair copies of the works or else very advanced-stage rough copies (Boyd, "Manuscripts" 345). The palimpsestic nature of the heavily revised manuscripts of some of the Russian novels will yield a great deal, although the English-language scholars of the American Nabokov are less fortunate: the erased and heavily crossed out text on the index-card manuscripts, written with a pencil equipped with an eraser (the writer's favorite feature of this tool), are not easily decipherable. In general, Nabokov's manuscripts appear to be quite accommodating: as opposed to those of Alexander Pushkin, there are practically no sketches or vignettes in the margins. Nabokov's work produces the impression of concentrated literary labor—of an artistic plan logically brought to life.

Description of an Archival Copy

The safety of the rough draft is the statute assuring preservation of the power behind the literary work.

Osip Mandelstam, *Conversation about Dante*

The manuscript of Nabokov's last Russian novel is a part of the "Papers of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov" collection at the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Nabokov began donating various documents and manuscripts to the state depository in 1958, and the papers pertaining to *The Gift* were among them. According to the terms of the Instrument of Gift signed by Nabokov and by the Librarian of Congress (June 23, 1959), the author or his wife or son had control of both access and copyright for fifty years. After that point, the collection was

to be opened, and the as yet unpublished writings by Nabokov were transferred into the public domain as of July 2009.³

The incomplete materials relating to *The Gift* are distributed among eight folders (Box 2, folders 3-10). The condition of the manuscript is on the whole satisfactory—the text of the first chapter is written in blue and black ink, on one side of pages of yellowish rice paper;⁴ the pagination (sometimes doubled) is in the upper right corner. Nabokov's handwriting is, as a rule, quite legible. The main difficulty for the textologist when deciphering Nabokov's hand is that in the rough drafts, the author had the habit of drawing a line through the original text and inserting corrections in minute handwriting, both between lines and above the basic text; it would be fair to say that they are written anywhere there is blank space, and thus the added text is often arranged vertically on the page.

As a result of numerous layers of palimpsest and the thick lines used to mark out the text, the manuscript is almost illegible in places. The contents of the manuscript corpus of *The Gift* in the Library of Congress are as follows (in passing, I will provide additional information about the format of the text in the documents):

Folder 3. Chapter One of the novel. Advanced draft, holograph, heavy revisions and edits by the author, pages numbered 1-83; A4 paper, writing in ink.

Folder 4. Chapter Four ("The Life of Chernyshevski"). A typescript (blue ribbon) with handwritten revisions, pages numbered 1-54.

Folder 5. Continuation of the Chapter Four, pages numbered 55-108.

Folder 6. The Pink Notebook—an exercise book containing unpublished drafts and notes for a continuation of the novel.

Folder 7. Second Addendum to *The Gift*. On the first page there is a bracketed note in Nabokov's hand: "First: a short story 'Circle' (*Posled[nie] novosti*, 1934)—omit this title."

³ Additions were acquired by purchase in 1971 and 1991 and in gifts from Peter Pertzoff in 1964 and Jay Wilson in 1991. The papers of Nabokov were organized and described in 1969. They were reorganized in 2000 when additional material was integrated into the collection, with further processing and description completed in 2003. Until recently, Dmitri Nabokov was responding separately to each detailed application for access submitted through the Manuscript Division; presently it is still the prerogative of the Nabokov Estate to grant the rights for publication of any material cited from this and other Nabokov-related archives. Those items acquired by the Library from persons other than the author, which are located at the end of the collection, have no access restrictions.

⁴ I have provided this physical description because the Nabokov Papers in the Library of Congress, including the manuscript of *The Gift*, have recently been microfilmed (2008–2009). For conservation purposes, the originals in a collection that has been microfilmed are usually withdrawn from general circulation.

Folder 8. Typescript of an excerpt from the handwritten text in Folder 7—five pages total (ends with the phrase “as the Russian headlines were making witticisms . . .”).

Folder 9. The journal publication of the novel as printed in *Sovremennye zapiski* (1937), with minor edits by the author. Chapters One through Three.

Folder 10. Continuation of the journal publication, ending of Chapter Three, Chapter Five.

EDITING

Textological Riddles

The manuscript history of *The Gift* deserves to be among the primary directions of future research on Nabokov’s Russian prose of the 1930s. By general consensus, *The Gift* is the most difficult and stylistically intricate text that Nabokov created before he switched to English. Many consider this novel not only the pinnacle of Nabokov’s oeuvre, but also one of the best works of Russian prose in the twentieth century. One can, without exaggeration, compare the unrivaled position of *The Gift* with that of Joyce’s *Ulysses* in English literature of the same period.

Apart from the manuscript of *The Gift*, a few unpublished fragments pertaining to the novel have been held at the Library of Congress since the 1950s. One of them, consisting of 52 manuscript pages, is entitled “Second Addendum to *The Gift*.” Dmitri Nabokov arranged a public reading of selected passages during the international Nabokov Festival at Cornell University in 1998. The draft has since been published in English translation under the title “Father’s Butterflies” in *The Atlantic Monthly* (an excerpt) and then in *Nabokov’s Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings* (2000; full text); this was followed by the publication of the Russian original in the St. Petersburg journal *Star* (*Zvezda* 1, 2001).

In his “Note on the Translation of ‘Father’s Butterflies’” Dmitri Nabokov addresses the need for expertise that has arisen in deciphering Vladimir Nabokov’s unpublished papers. Five initial sheets were typed by Véra Nabokov on the old Russian-language Adler, “through whose ribbons many Nabokov works had passed” (*Nabokov’s Butterflies* 198). The remaining handwritten material was not entirely legible. In many places the text proved impervious even to the most discerning eyes and the text was deciphered only thanks to the efforts of Dmitri Nabokov, Brian Boyd and Jane Grayson. The problem was eventually resolved by Alexander Dolinin, who analyzed the remaining illegible portions, with the help of the Library’s sophisticated equipment, which made it possible to peek under the edges of the refractory palimpsest and to identify with considerable confidence what was on the layers beneath. This work resulted in a typescript

of extremely high quality, allowing the translator—Nabokov’s son—to declare that “very few puzzles remain” (*Nabokov’s Butterflies* 199). Parts of the archival materials in the Nabokov papers, especially those at the Library of Congress pertaining to *The Gift*, still present numerous puzzles to the researcher, who will need, in the words of Dmitri Nabokov, “to tug a remaining weed or two from the densest thickets” (Ibid.).

Around the same time that Nabokov started working on *The Gift*, Osip Mandelstam was pondering the universal challenges and individual secrets in the writer’s laboratory in his *Conversation about Dante*:

What can ignorant piety have to do with that? Dante is discussed as if he had the completed whole before his eyes even before he had begun work and as if he had utilized the technique of moulage, first casting in plaster, then in bronze. At best, he is handed a chisel and allowed to carve or, as they love to call it, “to sculpt.” However, one small detail is forgotten: the chisel only removes the excess, and a sculptor’s draft leaves no material traces (something the public admires). The stages of a sculptor’s work correspond to the writer’s series of drafts. Rough drafts are never destroyed. (Mandelstam 415)

Studying “the excess” is as valuable as following the stages of inspiration in the writer’s work, especially in the case of Nabokov, who claimed that he always had “the completed whole” of the future work in his mind. Exploration of the textological riddles of *The Gift* and its immediate context (which includes the unpublished drafts, plans, sketches, printed materials that were edited, as well as Nabokov’s private and business correspondence regarding publication of the novel), reveals, if not the secrets, then at least certain artistic principles that led to the writer’s unique stylistic choices.

This preparatory study is intended to be the first step towards a future academic edition. Such an edition would include not only extensive commentary on the literary history, but also provide existing versions of the text that have been deciphered through careful perusal of the manuscripts. Ideally, this edition would also contain photographic reproductions of the handwritten originals, as was done with the recent publication of Nabokov’s *The Original of Laura* (Knopf, 2009).

A thorough, scrupulous examination of the available parts of the manuscript of *The Gift* will enhance our understanding of how a creative genius operates, and will help to illuminate some of the more obscure parts of the work already known to us. The final product should be available both for research and for general interest, and would certainly help to increase interest in Nabokov’s work among the non-Russian readership.

THE UNWRITTEN PART TWO

A Satellite Story: “Krug”

The first offshoot of *The Gift* consisted of a smaller “satellite” (as Nabokov called it), “*Krug*,” translated and published as a short story under the title “The Circle.” It is told from the perspectives of episodic characters marginal to the main narrative of the novel (Tania, Fyodor’s sister, and the schoolmaster’s son, Innokentiy). The author explained the design years later:

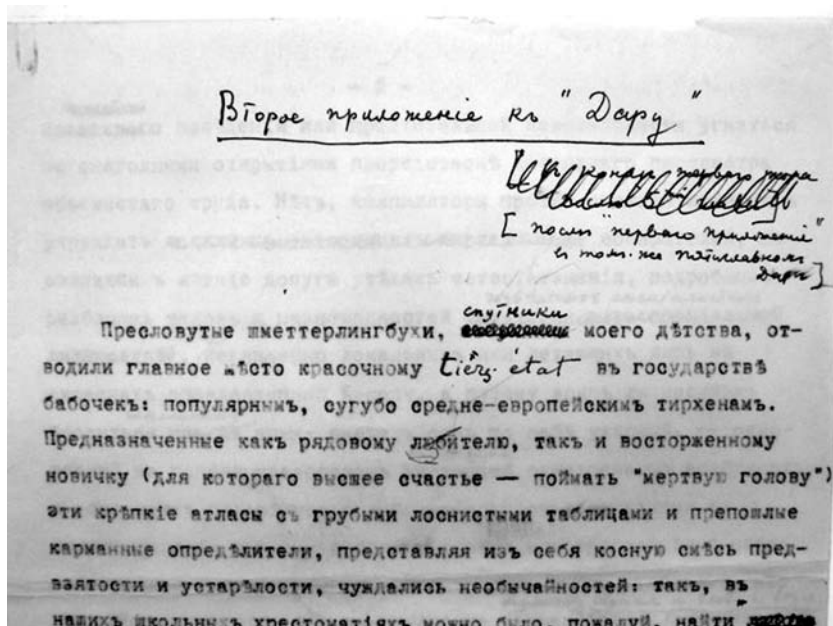
By the middle of 1936, not long before leaving Berlin forever and finishing *The Gift* in France, I must have completed at least four-fifths of its last chapter when at some point a small satellite separated itself from the main body of the novel and started to revolve around it. Psychologically, the separation may have been sparked either by the mention of Tanya’s baby in her brother’s letter or by his recalling the village schoolmaster in a doomful dream. Technically, the circle which the present corollary describes (its last sentence existing implicitly before its first one) belongs to the same serpent-biting-its-tail type as the circular structure of the fourth chapter in *Dar* [Russian title of *The Gift*] (or, for that matter, *Finnegans Wake*, which it preceded). A knowledge of the novel is not required for the enjoyment of the corollary which has its own orbit and colored fire, but some practical help may be derived from the reader’s knowing that the action of *The Gift* starts on April 1, 1926, and ends on June 29, 1929 (spanning three years in the life of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, a young émigré in Berlin); that his sister’s marriage takes place in Paris at the end of 1926; and that her daughter is born three years later, and is only seven in June 1936, and not “around ten,” as Innokentiy, the schoolmaster’s son, is permitted to assume (behind the author’s back) when he visits Paris in “The Circle.” (*The Stories* 659)

In fact, Nabokov misinforms his readers by giving an erroneous date for the composition of “The Circle,” which should be 1934. In an earlier letter to Roman Grynberg (November 5, 1952) Nabokov had been more sincere and admitted that he composed the story while working out the “scheme” of *The Gift* (Yangirov 378-79). Nabokov later gave a false version of the composition history of *The Gift*. He believed that, among readers familiar with the novel, the story would produce “a delightful effect of oblique recognition, of shifting shades enriched with new sense.” This narrative displacement allows readers to observe the world of *The Gift* not through the eyes of Fyodor, but through those of an outsider. Innokentiy is closer to old Russia’s idealistic radicals, while Fyodor’s family obviously belongs to liberal aristocrats (*The Stories* 600), and thus the particular color of its perception does not always coincide with that of the main character.

The writer hoped to print this short story as the “First Addendum” to *The Gift*; the second would have been an entomological fragment suggesting yet another possible continuation that Nabokov had considered for his novel.

Catching Father’s Butterflies

Although Nabokov had been producing new novels at the rate of one per year, the idea of continuing *The Gift* was still haunting his mind in the late 1930s, even after he had formally completed the novel. Brian Boyd estimates that Nabokov composed a long appendix to *The Gift* sometime in 1939 (Boyd, “Nabokov, Literature, Lepidoptera” 7). In this fifty-two page typescript, entitled “Second Addendum” in Nabokov’s manuscript, the protagonist and narrator Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev recounts his own early love for Lepidoptera and expounds his father’s incisive but cryptic ideas on speciation and evolution, supposedly noted down in outline on the eve of his departure for the final expedition (Ibid.). Nabokov did not publish this appendix during his lifetime—first because he still hoped to expand *The Gift*, then later because of his switch to a new language—until finally he perhaps realized that the whole project was simply irrelevant in the alien cultural context.



[III. 1-2] The title page of the “Second Addendum” typed by Véra Nabokov

It is difficult to disagree with Boyd's assertion that those who have read "Father's Butterflies" will have noticed that it is an opaque text, though also unparalleled and unusually rewarding: "Many of its difficulties arise from its subject matter—Lepidoptera, taxonomy and evolutionary theory—and await explication from some impeccable and improbable scholar perfectly fluent in Russian and Nabokov and with an intricate knowledge of theories of speciation in the period between, say, 1890 (when Konstantin Godunov-Cherdyntsev supposedly began publishing) and 1939 (when Nabokov certainly finished writing *Father's Butterflies*)" (Boyd, "The Expected Stress" 22).

The addendum to the novel is written in the form of a scientific meditation and is framed as Fyodor's memoir. A very intimate experience for Nabokov, it was also his professional calling, as he confides to his sister Elena at a time when employment as curator of the Harvard University entomological collections seems more realistic than nebulous literary pursuits: "In a certain sense, in *The Gift*, I 'foretold' my destiny—this retreat into entomology" (November 26, 1945; *Selected Letters* 59). The hero leafs through the entomological encyclopedia, *Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire*, in four volumes, and reflects on both the contents and the stylistic idiosyncrasies of his father's imaginary book: "I liked the solidity of my father's method, for I liked sturdy toys. For every genus there was a supplementary list of Palearctic species that did not occur within the confines under examination, complete with precise 'references' to textual location. Each Russian butterfly was allocated from one to five pages of small print, depending on its obscurity or variability, i.e., the more mysterious or changeable, the more attention it received. In places a small map helped to assimilate the detailed description of a species' or its subspecies' distribution, just as an oval photograph in the text added something to the careful exposition of observations of the habits observed in a given butterfly" (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 209). Nabokov the entomologist dreamed of writing something such as this throughout his entire life and, actually, once came very close to fulfilling this plan in the mid-1960s; however, difficulties with finding the right publisher and the sheer scope of the project diverted him. In the preliminary sketches Nabokov teases his readers with numerous allusions to the superstructure of *The Gift* (cf. "the blue gifts" of Fyodor's childhood in the passage below). He places the roots of the protagonist's prose deeply in his father's fictitious discourse, which, for its own part, owes much to Pushkin's lucidity, linear English logic and the eloquence of the French philosophy—an ideal combination that one might suspect the writer strove for himself:

Today, as I reread these four plump volumes (of a different color, alas, than the blue gifts brought for my childhood), not only do I find in them my fondest recollections, and revel in information that, at the time, was not as

comprehensible, but the very body, flow, and structure of the whole work touches me in the professional sense of a craft handed down. I suddenly recognize in my father's words the wellsprings of my own prose: squeamishness toward fudging and smudging, the reciprocal dovetailing of thought and word, the inchworm progress of a sentence—and even some embryos of my own parentheses. To these traits must be added my father's predilection for the semicolon (often preceding a conjunction—something one does find in the language of his university tutors: *'that scholarly pause'* an echo of unhurried English logic—but at the same time related to Montaigne whom he regarded so highly); and I doubt that the development of these traits under my frequently willful pen was a conscious act. (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 210)

According to Nabokov's chronology, *Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire* would have been published fifteen years prior to Fyodor's reminiscences, which took place around 1927. Fyodor confesses that because of the author's death, publication of the translation was delayed, and he has no idea where the manuscript is now. To a great extent the very feat of writing out this heavy research in four volumes can be considered a kind of *gift* from Fyodor's father to his beloved Russia—in a similar way Nabokov viewed his own novel as a paradigmatic gift to Russian literature: "The independence and proud stubbornness that had made my father write his work in his mother tongue, devoid even of the Latin synopses that, for the benefit of foreigners, were included in Russian scientific journals, did much to slow the book's westward penetration—which was a pity, for, in passing, it resolves a good number of problems regarding western fauna. Nonetheless, even if very slowly, and thanks more to illustrations than text, my father's views of relationships among species within various 'difficult' genera have to a degree already made their mark on the literature in the West" (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 212).

Between Politics, Prose and Science

Though he was seemingly detached from contemporary Soviet Russia, Nabokov remained attuned to its everyday problems and engaged in polemics with the regime much more proactively than has been presumed. An example of such latent criticism of Soviet science and its pre-revolutionary precursors is found in "Father's Butterflies":

When, on one occasion, Count B., the governor of one of our central provinces, a boyhood friend and distant relative of my father's, addressed to him an official, friendly request for a radical means of dealing with some highly energetic caterpillar that had suddenly gone on a rampage against the province's forests, my father replied, 'I sympathize with you, but do not find it possible to meddle

in the private life of an insect when science does not require it.' He detested applied entomology—and I cannot imagine how he could work in present-day Russia, where his beloved science is wholly reduced to anti-locust campaigns or class struggles against agricultural saboteurs. This horrid debasement of 'sublime curiosity' and its hybridization with unnatural factors (social ones, for instance) explain (apart from the general numbing of Russia) the artificial oblivion that has befallen his work in his homeland. No wonder that even the crowning achievement among his biological reflections, that wonderful theory of 'natural classification'... has so far found no followers in Russia, and has penetrated abroad rather haphazardly and in incomplete, muddled form. (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 213)

In the original Russian text of *the addendum*, the last part of the sentence about anti-locust campaigns in the above-cited passage reads: "...gde ego lyubimaya nauka splosh' svedena k pokhodu na saranchu ili klassovoi bor'be s ogorodnymi vrediteli," which is, as Victor Fet notices, an obvious pun on dual meaning of the ideologically loaded term "vrediteli" [saboteurs]. Agricultural (*ogorodnye*, i.e. vegetable garden) *vrediteli* are insect "pests." However, during the Stalin era the word "vrediteli" in general referred first of all to human "saboteurs" who were to be denounced, arrested and executed. In the original Russian phrase, the meaning is heavily weighted toward insects, thus creating a "class struggle against insects" (Fet 13). "Agricultural saboteurs" in English, as the scholar justly asserts, can only be humans, and not insects. Besides being a reference to a real problem which faced applied entomology in the south of Russia and the USSR, the anti-locust campaign ("*pokhod na saranchu*"), is also Nabokov's hidden reference to the famous incident involving Alexander Pushkin during his exile in the southern Russian city of Odessa. On May 22, 1824 Count Vorontsov, in writing, ordered young Pushkin (who was assigned to his office as a clerk) to make a report on a locust infestation. Pushkin reported, in verse:

The locust flew, flew,
And landed
Sat, sat, ate all,
And left again.

This verse is one of the few entomological poems in Pushkin's work (other than Prince Gvidon's triple metamorphosis into a mosquito, a fly, and a bumblebee in *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*). The Old World locust in question (*Locusta migratoria*, the eighth Egyptian plague) should not be confused with the "locust" found in the eastern United States, which is in fact not a locust (a type of grasshopper) but a cicada—as Shade once explained to Kinbote (*Pale Fire*, Commentary to Line 238) (Fet 14).

Pushkin's presence is not coincidental here. Fyodor had been inspired by Pushkin "while writing the now-abandoned life of his father, by the purity of Pushkin's prose and the clarity of his thought" (Boyd, "Nabokov's Butterflies" 55); he constantly contrasts Pushkin with Nikolai Chernyshevski, whose mock biography he composes. Brian Boyd sees this opposition largely in Hegelian terms, noting that Chernyshevski's life in exile in north-central Asia is as bleak and empty as Count Godunov's time "just a little farther south had been rapturous and rewarding":

If the fulfillment Fyodor had tried to depict in his life of his father had been . . . a thesis not quite yet earned, and the life of Chernyshevski its antithesis, a life of frustration, Fyodor's story of his own life, *The Gift* itself, becomes a synthesis: it combines his initial chafing at his émigré existence with his retrospective realization that the apparent frustrations of the past now seem like the concealed but kindly design of a fate that has brought him his true love, Zina Mertz, and has developed his art to its full maturity. (Ibid.)

Toward the end of the "Second Addendum" this synthesis culminates in Fyodor's powerful metaphysical soliloquy: "Whatever may lie in store for the soul, however fully earthly mishaps may be resolved, there must remain a faint hum, vague as stardust, even if its source vanishes with the earth. That is why I cannot forgive the censorship of death, the prison officials of the other world, the veto imposed on the research envisioned by my father. It is not for me, alas, to complete it" (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 234). Indeed, Nabokov never completed or revisited the sequel to his last Russian novel.

In reading the addendum as a scientific manifesto, scholars have argued that the principal source of Nabokov's dissatisfaction with natural selection lay in the analogy he established between the creator of a fictional work and the Creator of the earth. This, as Leland de la Durantaye lucidly explains, should make clear to us why Nabokov never finished his "furious refutation": "Just as in the case of Goethe [and his essentially erroneous theory of colors], what motivated Nabokov's scientific claim regarding deception and mimicry was an aesthetic—or, perhaps, a theological—question. What he wished to demonstrate . . . was a fundamental analogy between the Book of the World and the book of the artist—and not just any artist, but himself" (de la Durantaye 155). The fact that Nabokov's hypothesis is incomplete or erroneous as a *scientific theory* takes nothing away from his art; in fact, the contrary might be asserted. Attacking natural selection was a way of attacking the utilitarianism of his age. In the addendum to *The Gift*, we read that "[n]ature found it amusing, or artistically valid, to retain, near a selected species, an elegant corollary" (*Nabokov's Butterflies* 226). Stephen Blackwell, in *The Quill and the Scalpel*, aptly supports this view of Nabokov as adopting a special strategy

in his effort to explore alternative theories of speciation, based on doubts raised by mimicry: “Rather than represent the professional voice of a scientist directly, by means of his lepidopterist character, Nabokov instead has the scientist’s son Fyodor, a poet and budding novelist, re-create a vision of the Russian scientific text indirectly . . . with the assistance of memory. Why all these added layers of complexity? . . . to have the technical prose grasped almost from the void, distilled, and refracted by an *artistic mind*” (Blackwell 14; italics in the original). What the reader finds in the story is not an isolated piece of scientific discourse, but “rather a scientific approach to nature that has been absorbed and interwoven with the very fabric of the artistic text itself, by means of the artist-son’s consciousness and memory. Fyodor may not have fully grasped every aspect of the theory in his father’s ‘supplement,’ but his intense urge to do so, and to integrate that experience into his art, tells us a great deal about Nabokov’s ambitions for the nexus between his own scientific and artistic passions” (Blackwell 15), which cross traditional boundaries and defy typical classifications.

The Pink Notebook Mystery

The third alternative path is seen in Nabokov’s possible contemplation of expanding the novel’s Pushkinian conclusion and using his own completion of Pushkin’s unfinished dramatic poem *Rusalka* (*The Water-Nymph*) as a transition to a sequel. In this unwritten second part the action is moved to Paris in the late 1930s (almost a decade after we leave our acquaintances in Berlin). Zina Mertz dies in a car accident and Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, as a consequence, withdraws into himself.

As with the second part of *The Gift* a century later, Pushkin’s *The Water-Nymph* was left unfinished some time after 1832; it uses the familiar motif of the transformation of a drowned girl into a water spirit, combining it with the common theme of a poor girl whose upper-class lover abandons her for a more profitable marriage. Pushkin breaks off the short drama after a line in scene 6, by which time it is clear that the “little *rusalka*,” the seven-year-old daughter of the Prince and the Miller’s daughter, will somehow lure her father to his death in the Dnieper River and thus avenge her mother. All the works in Pushkin’s cycle of “little tragedies” have non-Russian locales—France, Austria, Spain, England; *Rusalka* draws on elements of Russian folklore and the belief that a drowned girl may try to lure others to their death (Brown 134-35).

At least three scholars have attempted to decipher the cryptic contents of the modest lined exercise book with a pink paper cover (Boyd, *Russian Years* 516-20; Grayson; Dolinin, *Istinnaia zhizn’* 281-90). The lengthy entry in the front of the notebook covers 33 consecutive unnumbered sides; another entry, identified at the top of the first page as “last chapter” and ending with the single centered

word “Vse” [meaning: “This is it”; “The End”], covers just three sides, also unnumbered, starts from the back of the notebook and proceeds in the reverse direction. The pioneering detailed description and analysis of the contents were produced by Jane Grayson (available in English); Alexander Dolinin, in a chapter of his excellent Russian-language book on Sirin, corrects some initial misreadings and, more importantly, attempts to provide a coherent interpretation and to place this unfinished draft in the context of other projects that Nabokov was working on at the time. The material in the pink notebook can be summarized as falling into four basic sections:

- 1) A visit by Shchyogolev’s nephew, Mikhail Kostritsky, to Zina and Fyodor’s Paris apartment (pages 1-15);
- 2) A draft of an ending to Pushkin’s verse drama *Rusalka* (pages 16-19);
- 3) Fyodor’s meetings with a French prostitute in Paris, blending prose fragments with poetic lines (“Meetings with Colette,” pages 20-33);
- 4) The “last chapter,” beginning with Zina’s sudden death, featuring Falter, and ending with Fyodor reading his ending of *The Water-Nymph* to Koncheyev in Paris (back of the exercise book, pages 1-3).

The fragment is set almost a decade after the time when *The Gift* takes place. The heroes, like their creator, relocate from Berlin to Paris. Fyodor is about forty years old now, with his hair cut short, and looks slightly old-fashioned. Zina, on the other hand, is described having exactly “the same sliding, leggy walk” and “the same inclination of her narrow back” as fifteen years ago. It also becomes clear that Fyodor is now a recognized author with a few novels under his belt.

Jane Grayson is convincing in her evaluation that, while we are evidently facing a draft — “with a good deal of crossing-out, writing and re-writing” — it is at the same time clearly recognizable as a shaped piece of sequential narrative presented in a series of self-contained episodes (Grayson 28).

The Shchyogolevs, who left for Denmark at the end of the fifth chapter, are still in Copenhagen. Boris Shchyogolev’s nephew, Kostritsky, appears; he is dressed untidily, with a missing tooth and bitten finger-nails. Like his uncle, the young man is engrossed in modern politics and his colloquial speech is strongly reminiscent of the style of Zina’s stepfather. Kostritsky’s visit in the first section turns into a distasteful conversation about politics and money between Zina and a pro-Nazi fellow at the Godunovs’ tiny rented apartment. Fyodor intrudes upon that reality only to retreat from it into his poetic inner world. Kostritsky’s last name derives from the words “*kostrit*” — to lie or boast, and “*koster*” — the tough bark of plants (see Dahl’s dictionary) with possible connotations of “fiery” due to the similarity in sound to the word *kostyor* (campfire or bonfire). Kostritsky projects an ardent single-mindedness that identifies him as an heir to the Russian

radical tradition established by Nikolai Chernyshevski and Turgenev's nihilists (the name of Ivan Turgenev is visible through one of the crossed-out lines in the notebook). Zina assures Kostritsky that she has nothing in common with her stepfather, that she herself is half Jewish, and that his rubbish annoys her, but the guest seems to pay little attention to these interpolations. Fyodor is less patient when he is introduced to Kostritsky. He has just come from a busy day and wants to write; seeing an irritating stranger in the house leads him to make a sharp remark to Zina and leave the apartment.

It is true, remarks Grayson, that in *The Gift* the young Fyodor at times is "shown to be arrogantly, comically at odds with his surroundings" (as when he launches into a mental diatribe against Germans on a Berlin tram, only to discover that the poor passenger who triggered this spontaneous vexation is in fact a Russian), but he is never depicted as divided against himself (Grayson 33). The scholar notes the narrative bifurcation and the character's ability to view himself as the "other," as well as the overall dark tone of this episode.

Fyodor and the Prostitute

Two episodes from the Pink Notebook, entitled "Rendezvous with Colette," are densely erotic and foreshadow future scenes in *Lolita* (although Colette is older than Dolores Haze; she is about 18-19 years old). The teasingly sexual passages may also, paradoxically, bring to mind another incomplete work by Nabokov, his last English-language novel, *The Original of Laura*. The excerpt about Fyodor and Colette is very much in tune with Gaito Gazdanov's *An Evening with Claire* (1929), a novel set mainly in Paris and telling a story of the protagonist's tormenting relationship with a young French woman named Claire. Contemporary critics compared Nabokov's prose with that of Gazdanov, who had emerged among the Russian émigré writers as the second most talented young prose writer after Sirin.

The quasi-memoir is written in "the aftermath of [Fyodor's] intense and destructive affair" (Grayson 34) with a woman, who introduces herself as Yvonne. Prostitution flourished in Paris in the 1930s and soon, during the World War II German occupation of France, twenty of the capital's leading brothels, including *le Chabonais*, *le Sphinx* and *le One Two Two*, would be reserved by the Wehrmacht for German officers and collaborating Frenchmen. During their first meeting, Fyodor takes the unknown prostitute to an adjacent hotel (a similar episode is found in Nabokov's earlier short story "The Return of Chorb," 1925). In a sort of an internal rhyme, Fyodor says his name is "Ivan"; like this false identity, "Yvonne" must also be Colette's alias for her interaction with clients. Two meetings between the protagonists take place; Fyodor arranges a third and Yvonne assures him, using the French idiom "*poser un lapin*," that she never lets

people down. However, Fyodor is either unwilling or unable to come at that point, and the affair ends as it started, in medias res.

The following episode has not been cited yet by either Grayson or Dolinin in their exceptionally thorough studies, so I will quote from it:

He turned around and so did she. He took six steps towards her. She took three steps forward. A kind of dance. Both halted. Silence.

The straight and transparent level of her eyes fell on the knot of his tie.

“So, how much?” Fyodor Konstantinovich asked.

She answered shortly and glibly.

[crossed out: “hundred” [illegible]] listening to the echo of numbers he was able to realize, —French pun, “be carried away” [crossed out: *to take the bit between one’s teeth*] — and a rhyme on a lance under the queen’s window.

And I answered: “A bit too much”

Although I’d give mountains of gold,

Although I knew I’d pay with my life,

However much it takes—I will get it. [In the original the preceding four lines form a rhymed quatrain—Y.L.]

Already walking away—just [out of] the corner of his eye, a moment and he will disappear . . . She said distinctly: *Eh bien, tant pis!* —the lady who taught music similarly forced me to strike with a little finger as if it was a small hammer when I was messing with keys.

As soon as I gave in, she started moving—briskly and closely moving her heels—so the pavement immediately became awfully narrow and uncomfortable; then touching Fyodor Konstantinovich’s elbow she led him across the street—a petite guide and a huge, sullen, exultant, terrible blind man.

Life’s comforts: straight from the street a door, yellow small hallway with a fence. She nodded to a clerk, number twelve, accompanied by the convoluted sound of a long bell.

She went up the steep stairs rotating her slender, agile, forthright buttock. “La vie parisienne,” only without a hat box.

Such a room. A worn mirror and a bedsheet that was not fresh but had been assiduously ironed—everything as it should be, including the washstand with a single hair and a monumental bidet. A parody of a maidservant took the payment for the room and a tip, and in passing to her the money also turned counterfeit, into board game tokens, into chocolate coins. Enfin seuls.

[Crossed out: *eighteen*; inscribed on the margins: *eighteen or nineteen?*] years old, light, diminutive, with a glossy black head, lovely greenish eyes, dimples, and dirty fingernails. It’s wild luck, it’s absolute luck, I can’t, I am going to weep.

“You’re right,” she said, “I am a slob,” and started to wash her hands while singing.

Singing and bowing, she took the banknote. And one wished to live so that no sound would be heard . . . — as some swarthy adolescent had written. [In the margin: Still, be careful: G . . .]

Brockhaus, same as the fifteen-year-old Efron,—is on his knees in the corner of the study.

To outwit or is it all the same? You are young and will remain young . . .

Noticing, anticipating, respectful and respecting his tenderness, she asked whether she should remove her lipstick. — Actually this happened during their second rendezvous. The first time it was not so important. How pretty you are! Seriously and politely she thanked for [a flattering remark?] cautiously [*deleted, and then restored*: tucking up] her net stockings to her ankles.

Her slender back [illegible] torn by darkness reflected in the mirror.

Unbelievable that this immense, dense, blind,—he didn't know how to define it—happiness, torture, a path in the remote youth—could be contained in this petite body. I will die right now. Survived but with such a groan. She commented [one detail] with short laugh:

– The one who invented this trick (*ce truc-la*) was pretty smart (*malin*).

She was not in a hurry to get dressed. Listening to the music of a barrel organ rising from the street [*deleted*: Turgenev would have recognized exactly what kind], she stood naked between the glass and the dirty muslin curtain, with one foot on the other, showing through the yellow-grey muslin.

Für die Reine alles ist Rein.⁵

Meanwhile he sat down on the undone edge of the deceived bed and started putting on his dear, comfortable shoes: the laces on the left one were still tied.

They honestly exchanged names: “Yvonne. Es toi?” “Ivan”

When they went out and said goodbye to each other she turned immediately into a boutique. Merrily: “Je vais m'acheter des bas!” which she pronounced almost like “bo” — because of delicious anticipation.⁶

The structure of this scene is obviously rather narrow compared to other parts of the Pink Notebook, especially, as Jane Grayson observes, in that there is just one viewpoint, Fyodor's, but “again his inner world is presented within the frame of an outer reality. In this case it is a remembered past framed by a narrative past” (Grayson 34). Nabokov employs the shifts between the third and first person narration so familiar to those who have read *The Gift*, and at certain moments he subjects his prose to a delicate metamorphosis into poetry.

Grayson goes on to highlight three narrative devices that mark the representation of the brief affair as evoked by Fyodor in all its forbidden intensity and beauty.

First, it is “an exercise of memory which is at the same time an exercise of the imagination and the transmutation of the raw stuff of experience into art,”

⁵ An erroneous German quote from the New Testament: “All things are clean to the clean”—*Titus* 1:15.

⁶ The Nabokov Collection, Library of Congress; the transcript and translation are mine. I am indebted to A. Dolinin and M. Malikova for their invaluable help with deciphering the original manuscript.

when an adulterous relationship with a common prostitute, sexual gratification obtained in the most tawdry fashion, becomes a subject of a powerful and inspiring experience transcending into a high art of poetry (Grayson 35).

The second device that Fyodor calls upon is irony: he “values and emphasizes the discrepancy, the complete mismatch between his arousal and the heavy emotional involvement” (ibid.) and Colette-Yvonne’s blithe, routine professionalism.

Finally, “to keep his aesthetic and moral balance, and not slip into pornography or *poshlost*” (Nabokov’s favorite word for “triteness”; ibid.), Fyodor/narrator employs the literary pastiche, ranging from general musings on the nature of parody to concrete allusions to Alexander Blok’s poem, possibly also about a prostitute, “*Neznakomka*” (“The Unknown Woman,” 1906).

Alexander Dolinin greatly expands Grayson’s list of literary allusions, showing how in this passage—compact but lavish with references—Fyodor summons the “Russian word, the dozing word” (this very quote demonstrates Nabokov’s preoccupation with sheer sound play—“*russskoe slovo, solovoe slovo*”; Dolinin, “*Znaki i simvoly*” 512, n. 7). The episode, which hardly occupies two handwritten pages, includes references to Pushkin (“swarthy adolescent”) and his works such as “*Kniaziiu A.M. Gorchakovu*” (“To Count Gorchakov”) and *The Stone Guest*; poems by Afanasii Fet; Evgenii Baratynsky; Vassily Zhukovsky, and it even parodies the name of the Soviet writer Maxim Gorky (“maksimal’no gor’kii,” literally: “maximally bitter”) (Dolinin, *Istinnaiia zhizn’* 287). The profoundly “literature-centric” nature of the episode is also emphasized by the split appearance of the names Brockhaus and Efron (publishers of the Russian-language encyclopedia in 86 volumes, a counterpart of the Brockhaus Enzyklopädie and the Encyclopedia Britannica, which was printed in Imperial Russia in 1890–1906). Here Brockhaus and Efron are mentioned as the publishers of Pushkin’s complete works, edited by Vengerov; most likely, a boy is reading Pushkin’s erotic verses in this edition.

And again one cannot help noticing parallels between this fragmentary project and *The Original of Laura*, the last incomplete novel in English which Nabokov was struggling to finish before his death. Here Fyodor quotes from the dialogue between Don Karlos and Laura in Pushkin’s short drama *The Stone Guest* (1830)—“You are young and will remain young” (Colette is “about eighteen years old”):

Don Karlos:

Tell me, Laura,
How old are you?

Laura:

I am eighteen.

Don Karlos:

You are young...and will remain young
For another five or six years during which
Men will surround you,
Fondle, foster, and present gifts,
And entertain with nightly serenades...[...]

Laura:

...Come here, open the balcony. The sky is so silent.
[...] While far off, in the north — in Paris —
The sky perhaps is covered with black clouds...

(Pushkin 384-385; my translation)

Nabokov's Parisian girl of the same age is likewise seen standing near the window, between the glass and a muslin curtain. Blending Pushkin's Laura, who dreams of Paris, and Colette in that city in the present day, Nabokov links the past and present into a visual and poetic rhyme—"La vie parisienne," only without a hat box" may refer to the popular magazine of the same title, whose covers were usually adorned with sexually suggestive pictures. A transformative technique was possibly hinted at by the insertion of another clue in the title of Jacques Offenbach's opéra bouffe, "La vie parisienne" ("Parisian life"). The latter was turned by Robert Siodmak into a film around the same time (the French version premiered in January 1936 in Paris): the poster featured a frivolous image of a curvaceous leg pointing to a man's hat.

About a year later Fyodor returns to that corner of Paris where he had agreed to meet Yvonne. Godunov-Cherdyntsev has not written to her since they parted, despite having her address. Neither did he warn her that he was coming, although he knew that she regularly traveled up to Paris from Meudon, where her father worked as a gardener. Fyodor is tormented by unanswered questions ("Who is she? A girl in quotation marks, mid-priced, and because he is sad and intent, and obsessed with imagination which can be used to his disadvantage, most probably at an extra premium for him"; my translation). Grayson believes that this "reliance on chance is quite intentional, for he is well aware that he is engaging in a kind of moral and aesthetic brinkmanship" (35); deep down, Fyodor probably wishes this meeting would never occur.

As Fyodor walks past the urinals on the Paris street corners, mumbling a kind of panegyric to the French capital for all its mixture of lust and beauty, the "Yvonne-Ivan" combination playfully evokes another literary subtext—the poet Georgii Ivanov's daring novella, *Disintegration of the Atom* (*Raspad atoma*, 1938). Published in Paris in a meagre edition of 200 copies, it provoked controversies in the émigré press ranging from attacks by Khodasevich to praise by Zinaida Gippius. One of the scornful responses came from Nabokov himself:



[III. 1-3] Maurice Pepin, "Nude in the Moonlight" (*Le Sourire*, 1923)

[III. 1-4] *La Vie Parisienne*. Cover of the magazine featuring a girl with a hat box next to her (France, 1925)

[III. 1-5] Poster for Robert Siodmak's movie *La Vie Parisienne* (1936)



...This miserable pamphlet with its amateur searches for God and banal renderings of street urinals (descriptions that might embarrass only green readers) is simply very bad. [...] Georgii Ivanov should never have been frolicking with prose. (*Sovremennye zapiski* 70, 1940: 284)

Celebrating “the pale advertisement bananas next to the multi-legged urinals on the street corner,” Fyodor takes aim at Ivanov’s *flâneur*, who pathetically reveals his spiritual and corporeal experiences:

I am walking down the avenue, thinking about God, staring at the feminine faces. I like that one, she is pretty. I imagine how she washes her lower parts. Feet planted apart, knees slightly bent. Stockings slipping down her knees, her deep dark eyes look innocent and bird-like. I am convinced that an average Frenchwoman, as a rule, washes her lower parts fastidiously, but rarely washes her legs. What for? She is always in her stockings, frequently without even removing her shoes. I am thinking about France in general. About the nineteenth century, that still lingers on here...about baguettes getting wet in the public urinals [...] I am thinking about war [...] I am thinking about the banality of such thoughts... I am thinking about an epoch disintegrating in front of my eyes. About two basic kinds of women: either already prostitutes or those proud that they aren’t yet in the business of prostitution. [...] Woman as a self does not exist. She is a body and a reflected light. But here you have absorbed all my light and left. And all my light is gone away too. (Ivanov 8-9; my translation)

The agile but slovenly Colette is also shown during her most intimate rituals; she disappears from Fyodor’s life taking along “the light of his life, fire of his loins,” to paraphrase a later work by Nabokov.

Omry Ronen calls Nabokov’s strategy an “antiparody.” After studying Nabokov’s baffling “*Parizhskaia poema*” (“The Parisian Poem,” printed in *Novyi zhurnal* 47, 1944; possibly started in the late 1930s, in France), Ronen pointed to Georgii Ivanov’s *Disintegration of the Atom*, which is “subjected to fission in Nabokov’s long poem by being bombarded with references to the utmost stage of Russian poetry’s and Russian soul’s decay” (the graphomaniac poet and assassin Gorgulov, beheaded in Paris for killing the French president Doumer in 1932; [Ronen 68]).

As the drafts from the Pink Notebook demonstrate, Nabokov’s reading of his archenemy’s work was quite careful. The fact that Nabokov transmits a parallel experience to one of his own closest authorial “representatives,” Godunov-Cherdyntsev, makes us wonder whether, at least to some extent, he had also shared similar views.

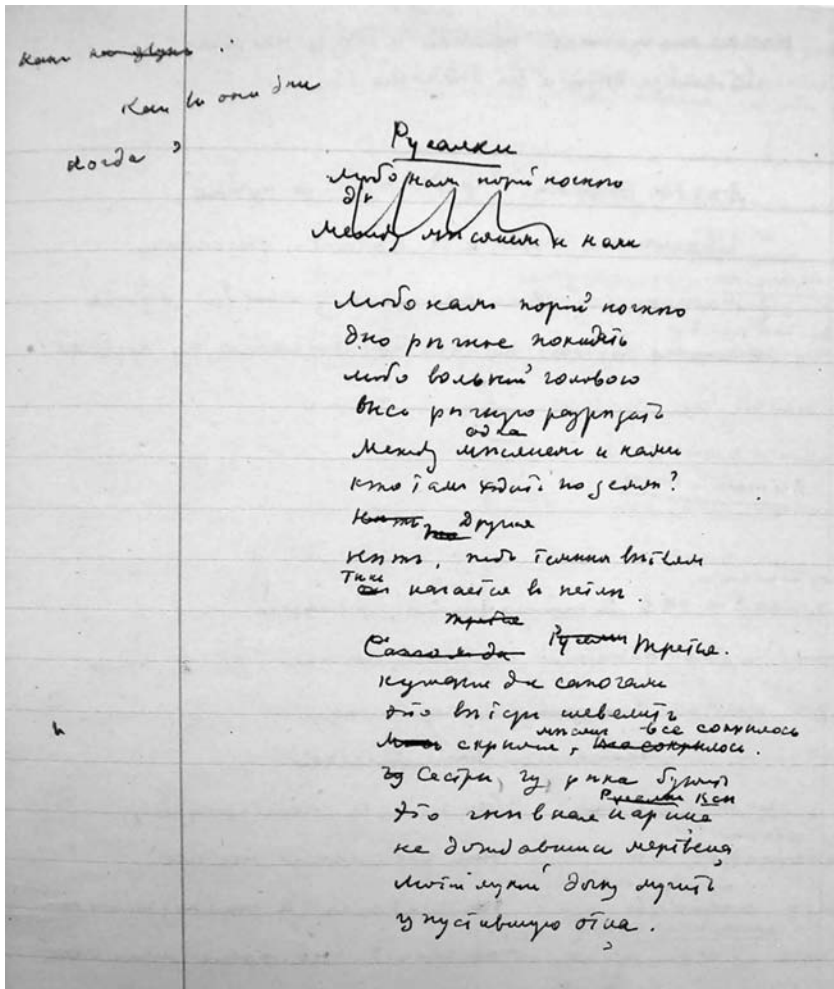
Where Might All of This Lead?

The problem of the texts comprising the mysterious notebook does not lie exclusively in their fragmentary nature or in the unfilled gaps in the narrative; it also stems from certain arcane connections with Nabokov's other writings of the time. One such puzzling link leads us to the prophetic character Falter from the short story "Ultima Thule." The author later claimed that this story was to be the first chapter of the unfinished novel, *Solus Rex*. Nabokov worked on the story during the winter of 1939-40, but "except for two chapters and a few notes...destroyed the unfinished thing" (*The Stories* 663). Could Nabokov, in mentioning "a few notes," have been referring to the contents of the Pink Notebook? If, based on the fact that Falter makes an appearance there, the answer is yes, this hypothesis might shed a whole new light on the status and possible plot developments of the unfinished second part of *The Gift*.

Based on the outline of the "last chapter," featuring Falter and a conversation between Fyodor and Koncheyev (the three pages at the back of the notebook), Alexander Dolinin has put forth a compelling theory (*Istinnaiia zhizn'* 281). According to his hypothesis, "Solus Rex" is the very beginning of the eponymous novel as it was published in *Sovremennye zapiski*, while "Ultima Thule" is a fragment of the novel whose position in the whole remains unknown. Later, when Nabokov translated them into English, he constructed a legend of their origins that did not correspond to the facts.

The two short stories, "Ultima Thule" and "Solus Rex," can be viewed not as sketches of a completely new novel but as embryonic texts that, along with the typescript of "Father's Butterflies," were to serve as inserted chapters in the continuation of *The Gift*—in the manner of "The Life of Chernyshevski" or the father-explorer's journey to Asia in the "first" volume.

The dominant mood of what was probably intended to become the last chapter of the second volume of *The Gift* is one of lost direction and a sense of futility (Grayson 45). Godunov-Cherdyntsev reads his ending of Pushkin's unfinished drama *The Water-Nymph* to Koncheyev, who is now a famous Russian poet-in-exile, during a German air raid in Paris. As Fyodor and Koncheyev speak, sirens begin sounding. As opposed to the two imaginary conversations contained in *The Gift*, this encounter is real. When Koncheyev is taking his leave Fyodor suddenly confronts him with a strange question: "*Donesem?*" (literally: "Shall we carry it through?"). Dolinin's interpretation of this is as follows: "contrary to what Koncheyev thinks, it refers not to their chances of physical survival in the war but to their obligation as Russian writers to keep alive the legacy of Russian literature bequeathed to them by their fathers and to pass it on to the next generations of writers. Fyodor's own attempt to complete Pushkin's unfinished work in a time of personal and social disasters is the ultimate symbolic gesture, an avowal of filial



[III. 1-6] Page with the poem *Rusalka* from the Pink Notebook (Library of Congress)

loyalties that Nabokov himself later chose to forsake” (“Nabokov as a Russian writer,” 62). Pushkin’s 1827 poem, “Akafist Ekaterine Nikolaevne Karamzinoi” (“A Canticle to Ekaterina Karamzin”), contains another clue, a line about the messenger who “carries his gift with reverence” — “Svoi dar neset s blagogoven’em.” It was Nikolai Karamzin’s *History of the Russian State* that provoked Pushkin to write his drama *Boris Godunov*, which was first printed in 1831, ironically with two scenes omitted due to the tensions with Czarist censorship.

In support of Dolinin’s theory (*Istinnaiia zhizn’* 288), it should also be noted that one of the rough plotlines in Nabokov’s unrealized plan involves Fyodor’s

fleeting affair with a certain Madame Blagovo (*Muza Blagoveshchenskaia*), whose very aristocratic surname (meaning “good news” in the evangelical sense, and also connoting “awe,” “veneration,” and “bliss”) echoes the last word of the quoted line from Pushkin’s poem. The idea of cultural inheritance and artistic bliss was apparently intended as the third aesthetic pillar of the unwritten second volume. And although the sense of doom and the apocalypse of a civilization permeates this final chapter, moving from Fyodor’s personal crisis to a large-scale political tragedy (more on a loss of direction and a sense of futility see Grayson 45), the “good news” is still part of the novel’s legacy; that much, at least, is contained in the hope of perpetual literary renewal and historical continuity.

By the time Nabokov could shape any distinct vision for his characters’ future, his mind had already turned to the task of writing fiction in English. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was completed in January 1939. Although Nabokov “was still not ready to relinquish Russian,” as Brian Boyd asserts, the spring of that year “seems the likeliest time” for him to have written the “Second Appendix to *The Gift*” (*Russian Years* 504; 505). None of the seeds sown for the continuation of *The Gift* were destined to blossom. The unfinished novel *Solus Rex*, perhaps the very nucleus of the second volume, if Dolinin’s suggestion is correct, was left as a series of disjointed sketches that were printed as two separate short stories; some motifs later evolved into scenes in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*.

Adolph Hitler’s army was marching towards Paris when a German bomb hit the Nabokovs’ apartment house on rue Boileau. The dreadful sound of sirens seems to have been echoed in the draft of the projected second part of *The Gift*. It was time for the Nabokov family to embark on the boat *Champlain* for the United States—the plan to continue *The Gift* was never realized. It remained as it was, with the existing complement of poems and butterflies.

In his new homeland Vladimir Nabokov submitted the “completion” of Pushkin’s *The Water-Nymph* as a whole piece to *Novyi zhurnal* (*New Journal* 10, 1942). This Russian-language American thick journal would become the writer’s primary venue for works written in his native language during his early years in the USA. The magazine was edited by the writer Mark Aldanov, who as late as mid-April 1941 would still inquire from New York: “Do not forget that you have definitely promised us your new novel—the continuation of *The Gift*” (Chernyshev 128). His friend had nothing to offer; the Pink Notebook remains the only slim testimony to what eventually might be seen as one of the most interesting, haunting sequels ever written by Nabokov.

Nabokov bid farewell to *Muza Blagovo* to make his fundamental decision to harness the English-language muse. As if to fold the patterned rug of life (resorting to Nabokov’s favorite metaphor), Anna Ivanovna Blagovo will resurface as the long-necked typist and wife of the Russian émigré writer vv in 1974, in Nabokov’s final published novel before his death.

THE HISTORY OF PUBLICATION

Serialized in the Press

Throughout the 1930s Nabokov's major works usually appeared in the magazine *Sovremennye zapiski* (*Contemporary Annals*). It is not surprising that from the outset *The Gift* was intended for publication in installments in that journal.⁷ The most prestigious and liberal mainstay on the spectrum of literary and political journalism in the Russian community abroad, the periodical was founded in Paris in 1920. The journal was enormously popular among the Russian-speaking diaspora from Prague to Shanghai, and was run by a group of Nabokov's older compatriots: Mark Vishniak, Vadim Rudnev, Alexander Gukovsky, Nikolai Avksentiev, and Ilya Fondaminsky-Bunakov. Although these were, for the most part, former Socialist Revolutionary party members, that fact rarely influenced the journal's tolerant political stance (The tsarist police considered the SRs extremely dangerous; between 1902 and 1905, their small, highly disciplined Combat Detachment assassinated two interior ministers, the Moscow governor-general, and other officials).

During the two decades of its existence, *Sovremennye zapiski* published seventy volumes (3-4 books annually, between 300-500 pages in each issue). Among the contributors were writers with established reputations such as Ivan Bunin, Vladislav Khodasevich, Georgii Adamovich, Mikhail Osorgin, Boris Zaitsev, Lev Shestov, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Dmitri Merezhkovsky. They were soon joined by a talented younger cohort — Nina Berberova, Vladimir Nabokov, Gaito Gazdanov, Boris Poplavsky, and others.

Chapter Four of *The Gift*, which consists entirely of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's biography of Chernyshevski, was omitted due to editorial pressure. Nabokov agreed to the omission with great reluctance, realizing that this was the price he needed to pay to have the novel published at all. Vishniak writes in his memoirs that in the judgment of the editors, "the life of Chernyshevski was depicted with such naturalistic—and even physiological—particulars, that its artistic value became dubious" (Vishniak 180). Vishniak recalls the general principles applied by the journal to editing and revising:

The editorial board viewed itself as something more than a mere mediator between an author and typography; it had every right *to edit* the material

⁷ *Sovremennye zapiski* 63 (April 1937): 5-87 (ch. One); 64 (September 1937): 98-150 (ch. 2); 65 (December 1937): 5-70 (chs. Two [cont.]—Three); 66 (May 1938): 5-42 (ch. Three [cont.]); 67 (October 1938): 69-146 (ch. Five). Also see: Dolinin, "K istorii sozdaniia i tischeniia romana 'Dar'."



[III. 1-7] The cover of the issue of *Sovremennye zapiski* 63 (April 1937) in which *The Gift* was printed

[III. 1-8] Table of Contents

[III. 1-9] The first page of the novel as it appeared in the magazine

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