INDIANA
SLAVIC
STUDIES

Volume 11 (2000)

ISSN 0073-6929

IN OTHER WORDS

STUDIES TO HONOR VADIM LIAPUNOV

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A Visit to a Cemetery and Nabokov's "The Visit to the Museum"

Sergei Davydov

To my fellow expatriate, Vadim

I

Inasmuch as exile and expatriation are phenomena of fate, I will begin my theoretical discourse on them with the following account. While I was walking one night through our cemetery in the Vermont college town of Middlebury, I had the sudden urge to smoke. But the wind kept blowing out match after match, so I fatefully stopped to breathe life into my cigarette behind the shield of a gravestone. In the light of the match, a year of death flashed before me: 1883. I sat on the tomb, leaned against the gravestone, inhaled deeply, and for a moment mourned the fact that Dostoevskii and Turgenev are no more. Suddenly an eerie afterimage flashed in my mind: the letters "BC" following the year on the tombstone. I turned around and lit a match again... And there it was: the deceased had died not only before the discovery of America, but before our era as well. And for the third time, I lit a match. On the gravestone I discerned the image of a cross and the letter "T" hanging from a ring, and a rudimentary bird. And underneath I read the following inscription:

Ashes of Amun-Her-Khepesh-Ef
Aged 2 years
Son of Sen Woset 3rd[1]
King of Egypt and his wife
Hathor-Hotpe
1883 B.C.

With this presumably logical explanation, everything became even more eerie. In the weeks to come I exerted a great deal of energy to piece together the puzzle of this curious expatriation. And the following is what I managed to unearth.

It turns out that the two-year-old Prince Amun-Her-Khepesh-Ef of the 12th Egyptian Dynasty, who died in 1883 BC, is indeed buried in our cemetery. For nearly four thousand years, the little Pharaoh was nestled between the mummies of his mom and dad in the Dashur pyramid some twenty miles from Cairo. But in 1840 Arab robbers eviscerated the tomb

Indiana Slavic Studies 11: 349–56, 2000

and sold the infant for fifteen dollars to some Spanish traders, who then brought the mummy to New York. Another forty years passed, and the patron of the Middlebury town museum, a certain Henry Sheldon, acquired it at an auction. Because of the prince's somewhat dilapidated condition Mr. Sheldon got him for the bargain price of ten dollars, and put the mummy on exhibit. But this roused the indignation of a local priest, who maintained that no corpse should be on public display. Mr. Sheldon therefore moved the pharaoh into the museum's attic, where he was promptly forgotten.

The Vermont climate did not agree with the little prince and his condition worsened. After another sixty years, during the 1945 restoration of the museum (which by then was called the Sheldon Museum), a lump of indeterminate scent and color was found in the attic with a label attached to it. The Chair of the Board of Trustees of the museum, George W. Mead, determined that "this was once a human being," and resolved to bury the lump in his family plot in the Middlebury cemetery. But that is not how things turned out. The local priest flatly refused to bury an infidel in a Christian cemetery, and Mr. Mead had to appeal to a less exacting clergyman in a neighboring town who, for a bottle of rum, baptized Amun-Her-Khepesh-Ef. The star-crossed convert—or what was left of him—was then placed on a ceremonial tray that had been forged by the town's blacksmith Leonard Zeeman, cremated in Mr. Zeeman's furnace, and his ashes were interred in accordance with Christian rites on lot 62 between the graves of Charlotte Moody and Caroline Mead. To this day, in the old West Cemetery in Middlebury, just beyond the College tennis courts, the Egyptian prince rests in foreign soil, under a Christian cross and two pagan hieroglyphs, "ankh" and "ba," standing for life and soul.

II

And now let us move closer to the point, to another startling expatriation. Nabokov has a Russian story called "The Visit to the Museum" (1938). The museum is located in a fictitious French town, Montisert, and can be seen as an abstruse but still accurate metaphor for exile, a metaphor that concludes with the fulfillment of the expatriate's most cherished and feared desire of returning to his old homeland. The narrator is a Russian émigré living in Paris, who, unlike his compatriots, nurses no nostalgia for his old homeland. Shortly before his departure for Montisert on some sort of business, an acquaintance asks him to check whether a portrait of his Russian grandfather painted by Gustave Leroy hangs in the Montisert museum, and to find out if it is possible to acquire it. The friend, whose "capacity to remain this side of fantasy" the narrator always doubted, adds the following background: "[A]fter the grandfather died in their St. Petersburg house back at the time of the Russo-Japanese

War, the contents of his apartment in Paris were sold at auction. The portrait, after some obscure peregrinations, was acquired by the museum of Leroy's native town."

Not susceptible to nostalgic fantasies of fellow compatriots, the narrator decides to ignore his friend's request. But in Montisert fate sees to it that a sudden downpour chases him under the very roof of the museum he was determined not to visit. He passes stuffed owls, cardboard boxes with minerals, black lumps that resemble "frozen frass," a Chinese vase, a map of Montisert in the seventeenth century, a skull, a pale worm immersed in alcohol, a sarcophagus, and other "ancient rubbish." The narrator, confident of his "capacity to remain on this side of fantasy," does not question the perilous randomness of this hodge-podge and accepts it at face value, for everything in the museum is "as it should be." Eventually he stops in front of the portrait of a Russian nobleman bearing the signature of Leroy: "The man, depicted in wretched oils, wore a frock coat, whiskers and a large pince-nez on a cord; he bore a likeness to Offenbach, but, in spite of the work's vile conventionality, I had the feeling one could make out in his features the horizon of a resemblance, as it were, to my friend"; and, one can add, not only to the narrator's friend, but also to Nabokov's own grandfather whose resemblance to the composer Jacques Offenbach is well documented.[1] The narrator's astonishment over the materialization of what he had considered to be the "figment of an unstable mind" gives way to a sudden elation at the thought of fulfilling his friend's cherished dream, and he goes to the curator of the museum. However, upon checking the catalogue, Mr. Godard, whose name and function render the museum curator the equivalent of god, insists that there is no such painting in his inventory. "The Return of the Herd" by Leroy—yes, but a Russian nobleman—no. In disbelief the narrator proposes the following deal: if the portrait does indeed turn up, the curator pledges to sell it for an agreed sum. However, if it is not there, the narrator will simply pay the curator the same amount. Mr. Godard makes him write a contract, using the red end of a red-and-blue pencil, and by signing it, the narrator has put his soul at stake. The portrait, naturally, is in its place, and the curator, annoyed over the catalog error, tears up the contract into little pieces that fall "like snowflakes into the massive spittoon."

Mr. *God*ard, wrathful at the impudence of a man who dared to contradict him by showing him the "reality" of his own domain, punishes the narrator by showing him the "unreality" which he has hitherto failed to perceive. The irked curator treats him to a bizarre procession through the

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[1] See the illustrations to V. Stark, "Pushkinskii fon rasskaza Nabokova 'Poseshchenie muzeia,'" in *Nabokovskii vestnik* 1 (St. Petersburg: Dorn, 1998), following p. 192.

museum, during which the narrator's initial "vague sense of alarm" gradually changes into "indescribable terror." The halls expand, displays multiply. Before the narrator's eyes flash in a rabid sequence books, dummy soldiers in jack boots, a helmet with a Rembrandtesque gleam, the enormous knee of a statue, the heel of a giantess, Oriental rugs, a bow and quiver lying on a tiger-skin, the skeleton of a whale "resembling a frigate's frame," icons, steam machines, the wheels of a locomotive, railroad station models, office cabinets, musical instruments, a pool, fountains, brooks, ponds...

The procession stops at the doorsteps of a theater, behind which resounds a burst of applause. Only beyond these doors, there is no theater, and the narrator exits from the "museum's maze" right into a snowy Russia, stepping in his soaked foreign shoes on native soil, where he will be detained, arrested, and miraculously released.

What is this? An Alice in Wonderland? The nightmare of Joseph K. with a happy end? Gogolesque gibberish? Or just one more Nabokovian variant on the theme of the return from exile of a "passportless soul"? In the 1927 poem "The Execution" ("Rasstrel"), Nabokov imagines a similar, though less fortunate scenario:

> Бывают ночи: только лягу,
> в Россию поплывает кровать;
> и вот ведут меня к оврагу,
> ведут к оврагу убивать.
>
> On certain nights as soon as I lie down
> my bed starts drifting into Russia,
> and presently I'm led to a ravine,
> to a ravine led to be killed.

Although the execution was only a dream, Nabokov wishes that it were true, as if only through death is it possible to return and to reclaim that which is native:

> Но, сердце, как бы ты хотело,
> чтоб это вправду было так:
> Россия, звезды, ночь расстрела
> и весь в черемухе овраг.
>
> But how you would have wished, my heart,
> that thus it all had really been:
> Russia, the stars, the night of execution
> and full of racemosas the ravine.

In the twenties, a Nabokov friend and former White-Army colonel, Prince Kachurin, advised Nabokov on how to cross the USSR borders

incognito. "The prince's golden heart, moderate brain power, and senile optimism, could alone have been responsible for his suggesting the journey."[2] Nabokov assigned this outlandish "exploit" to his hero Martin, from the novel *Glory*, who disappears without a trace behind the Soviet borders. However, in 1947, disguised as an American clergyman, Nabokov himself ventures on such an imaginary journey:

> Качурин, твой совет я принял
> и вот уж третий день живу
> в музейной обстановке, в синей
> гостиной с видом на Неву.
>
> Kachurin, your advice I've accepted
> and here I am, living for the third day
> in a museumist setup: a blue
> drawing room with a view on the Neva.
>
> ("To Prince S.M. Kachurin," 1947)

Prince Kachurin accomplished this exploit in his own way: he spent his final years in a Russian monastery in Alaska, and was buried in that erstwhile Russian soil.

In "The Visit to the Museum," the journey ends without grave consequences. The hero extricates himself from this unsought repatriation with only a small scare—perhaps because the return did not occur of his own volition. He had not grieved for Russia and cared little for legend-woven old times or buried ancestors, regardless of whether or not their portraits bore the signature of the famous Leroy. Nevertheless, it turns out that with the appearance of the portrait of a Russian nobleman risen from non-being, the narrator's deeply buried yearnings for his homeland are unexpectedly unearthed.

A museum would be the perfect place for this to happen. Here the past has been exiled from its native time and space into the alien realm of the present. Uprooted and displaced, an orphaned item loses its umbilical attachment and becomes an exhibit. In close proximity to other similar "exiles," it undergoes complex shifts and metamorphoses. In a museum, time and space are compressed and practically exist without barriers or direction: with every step begins a new continent and epoch. In this "gigantic mock-up universe," ruled by an utter arbitrariness of sequence and being, we find a tiger skin beneath the ankle of a Greek statue or a pale worm gazing through cloudy alcohol at the skeleton of a whale. The bric-a-brac of eviscerated and stuffed objects simulating the universe converts everything into "unreal trash."

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[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970), 141.

The essential elements of a museum's alphabet are omission, gap, and hiatus. Fragments, torsos, synecdoches all conceal a larger truth about the whole. The museum relates to the "real" universe in same way a stuffed bird relates to a live owl or as the museum catalog (known by the curator "as the Lord's Prayer") relates to the very museum, or finally, just as the Lord's Prayer relates to the heavenly kingdom itself. Again the familiar conspiracy of gaps, pauses, and hints, but the mystery remains eclipsed. Ellipsis, as the main trope of the museum syntax, contaminates with its own logic—or pathology—the entire surrounding. The museum custodian has an "empty sleeve" and "the ghost of his hand in his pocket" (missing limb). He answers questions with the routine phrase: "Science has not yet determined." The museum's curator releases stamped letters into the wastebasket (missing addressee), and the business contract is disposed of into a spittoon. There is a fatal gap in the catalogue (missing painting). The pathology of the museum syntax spreads to the characters' speech and into the very narrative of the story. Mr. Godard, hesitant to sell the painting, says: "I must first discuss the matter with the mayor, who has just died and has not yet been elected" (the words "a new one" are missing), while the narrator withholds from the reader the crucial segment of how he escaped from the clutches of the Soviet security organs.

A museum is a surreal burial ground for epochs and cultures. We find here a sarcophagus, a skull, a skeleton of a whale, "minerals in their open graves," "a trio of rusted tools bound by a funeral ribbon" to "dig in the past," an "assortment of strange black lumps" of unspecified "nature, composition and function." In a museum, decay abounds and matter "dematerializes." The past is dead, the future is wanting, and whatever lies "beyond" is unknown.

However, with the sudden epiphany of the portrait, whose very existence both the narrator and then the museum curator doubted, something goes awry. The picture of the Russian nobleman—rising, as it were, from non-being—touches off a sequence of events resulting in an ontological shock. The museum begins to expand, the exhibits multiply, mushroom, the rhythm of their alteration quickens, blanks narrow, time and space barriers collapse and gaps are filled. The quiet is invaded by sounds and movement overtakes lethargy. Waterfalls, fountains, steam machines, locomotive wheels, and a railroad station come to life. And like the portrait of the Russian nobleman (resembling Nabokov's own grandfather), a cherished but suppressed dream, the figment and terror of every émigré's mind, materializes: from the last museum hall in Southern France, the narrator exits straight into snow-covered Russia.

Initially he does not believe the veracity of the landscape unfolding before him. What if he is being treated to a silly parody of his homeland? After all, he ended up in this predicament through the door of a theater. However, as the "artificial night," "soft opacity" and "splendidly counterfeited fog" become more and more convincing, and "a joyous and unmistakable sensation of reality at last replaces all the unreal trash," the expatriate recognizes his native city, familiar to the point of tears. Mr. Godard's misappellation of the painting, "The Return of the Herd," proves in fact quite appropriate.

However, the bliss of homecoming does not last long, for the last fatal gap in this uncanny chain of events still remains to be filled. As the narrator glances at the sign over a shoe repair shop, he notices that one letter is missing. The missing "hard sign" (ъ), purged from the Russian orthography by the Soviets after the revolution, irrevocably updates the reality, turning the narrator's bliss into nightmare.

> Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land... and I had to do something, go somewhere, run; desperately protect my fragile, illegal life....

"No one can step twice into the same river," said Heraclitus. St. Petersburg has turned into Leningrad, the homeland has become foreign, and the narrator wishes to return quickly to what until then he considered exile. But, as he tries to strip off all "integuments of exile" and "remain ideally naked" in the snowy Soviet October night, he is detained and arrested. The story ends with the last gaping ellipsis: the narrator spares us the description of the "incredible patience and effort" which it took him to extricate himself from his predicament. The final sentence serves us the moral of the story: "ever since, I have foresworn carrying out commissions entrusted one by the insanity of others."

But what if everything was much more intriguing? What if, instead of an émigré's nightmare ("Oh, how many times in my sleep I had experienced a similar sensation!"), the émigré's most cherished dream came true? The museum only knows two horizons of time: it exists in the present, while its exhibits emerge from the past. The absence of future is a serious gap, which the denouement of Nabokov's story, perhaps, tries to fill. What if Nabokov, a master in telescoping space and time, ushers his hero not into contemporary Leningrad of the 1930s, but into a future Leningrad that has already become the past? In other words, the Soviet Union no longer exists, and by virtue of this fact, it has earned a legitimate place in the museum along with the memorabilia of other bygone civilizations like Egyptian dynasties, the Babylonian kingdom, or the Roman Empire. Such a "homecoming" would be the most marvelous fulfillment of an expatriate's most cherished dream. A museum, after all, is also the site of the Muses, and as such it makes the perfect stage for this utopian dream to come true, a dream that the émigré Nabokov mused about in his 1926 talk "On Generalities":

> The revolutionary fervor brought to life by chance will disappear by chance as has happened a thousand times in the history of mankind. Moronic communism in Russia will be replaced by something more intelligent, and in a hundred years from now, only historians will remember the extremely dull Mr. Ulianov.
> Let us then be like pagans or gods and enjoy our time [...] with its foretaste of eternity that every century of the past had and every century of the future will never lose.... The roulette of history knows no laws. Clio laughs at our clichés.[3]

Nabokov, like most of us, never conceived that we would see the fall of communism so soon. Nor did he ever expect that his exile would terminate with a triumphant return of his books to Russia, even if printed without the letter ъ.

The orphaned ashes of Amun-Her-Khepesh-Ef rest under the Christian cross and the hieroglyphs *ankh* and *ba* in the Vermont cemetery; Vladimir Nabokov was cremated and buried at the Vevey cemetery in Switzerland. Unlike the Egyptian prince, Nabokov was buried without Christian rites, to the tunes of two arias from Puccini's "La Bohème." No religious symbols enhance his bluish marble slate, which states simply:

> Vladimir Nabokov
> Ecrivain 1899–1977

In 1991 the ashes of Véra Nabokov were placed into her husband's urn. Their son Dmitri told me that one day his ashes too will join those of his parents.

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[3] "On Generalities" (1926), an unpublished Russian essay, New York Public Library, Berg Collection. Quoted from A. Dolinin's article, "Clio Laughs Last: Nabokov's Answer to Historicism," in Julian Connolly, ed., *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 205. The full Russian text of Nabokov's essay appeared in *Zvezda* 4 (1999).

Nabokov and the Anti-Apophatic Novel[1]

Stephen H. Blackwell

> There are no movements. There are writers.
> *Iulii Aikhenvald*

A movement is akin to a genre in that it represents a mode of communication and a philosophy of language, in particular, a theory of the connection between language and truth or reality (and implicitly also the nature of reality). In an era rich with movements (some new, some fading, others in their popular prime), Nabokov in his works gradually came to confront what appeared to be a crisis in communication of mysterious truths. While Symbolism had embodied the project of creating a new spiritualized reality through the intervention of art (by transforming life, re-creating life, spiritualizing the world, and so on), it also, ultimately, served as an example of language's limited ability to achieve any kind of "results" in the human sphere. In particular, art's promise as a bridge between the worldly and the transcendent, originally celebrated, fell into question, and perhaps the onset of WWI as much as anything ominously proved the absence of an aesthetically spiritualized world. It is no surprise that the next waves of art—Futurism, Acmeism, Zaum (trans-sense language), Proustian modernism of memory—shied away from explicit spiritual quests or, in the case of Zaum, even from referentiality itself. If Futurism continues the Promethean instinct represented by Symbolism's grandiose dream, then Zaum embodies the subtext of necessary failure to reach the goal by means of language. The key difference between the two is the way each grapples with the new, "non-spiritualized" reality. Futurism continues the affirmative momentum but moves entirely into the material sphere, while Zaum seeks to preserve the realm of the mysterious and the irrational by refusing the illusion of rational discourse and referentiality. This gesture is not essentially new or even original, instead echoing similar responses to spiritual needs found in neoplatonic apophaticism and in eastern (especially Buddhist) conceptions of spiritual revelation. Acmeism, on the other hand, represents an attempt to simplify matters, letting words do their work while reality, things, are glorified as already won-

[1] An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 32nd AAASS national convention in 1999, and I would like to express my thanks to John Burt Foster for his valuable suggestions offered as discussant on that panel.