



# NABOKOV AT CORNELL

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## Metapoetics and Metaphysics

Pushkin and Nabokov, 1799–1899

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Aleksandr Pushkin died without establishing a literary school and without leaving behind a single direct disciple. His poetic message, if it had at all been understood, was soon distorted by foes and friends. Russian literature after the Golden Age took a different course altogether by becoming a tool for the promotion of civic, social, moral, religious, and political causes—a practice that was to numb the aesthetic sensibilities of several generations of Russian readers and critics. The resurrection of Pushkin's legacy came one hundred years after his birth with the advent of the poets of the Silver Age who claimed

The following studies of Nabokov's metaphysics helped to shape the concept of this article: Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991); Petr Bitsill, "Vozrozhdenie allegorii," *Sovremennye zapiski* 61 (1996): 191–204; Brian Boyd, "Nabokov's Philosophical World," *Southern Review* 14 (1981): 260–301; Julian W. Connolly, "The Otherworldly in Nabokov's Poetry," *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 24 (1991): 329–39; Sergei Davydov, "Taksy-matreshki? Vladimira Nabokova (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1982); D. Barton Johnson, "Vladimir Nabokov's *Solus Rex* and the 'Ultima Thule' Theme," *Slavic Review* 40, no. 4 (1981): 543–56, and *Worlds in Regression* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985); Vladislav Khodasevich, "O Shirine," in idem, *Izbrannaiia proza*, ed. N. Berberova (New York: Russica Publishers, 1937), 200–209; Julian Moynahan, "A Russian Preface for Nabokov's *Behanding*," in *Novel* 1 (1967): 12–18; Véra Nabokov, "A Foreword," in *Stikhi* 3–4; Irena Ronen and Omry Ronen, "Diabolically Evocative: An Inquiry into the Meaning of Metaphor," *Slavica Hierosolymitana* 5–6 (1981): 371–86; William W. Rowe, *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1981); Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); Vladimir Varshavski, *Nezamechennoe pokolenie* (New York: Chekhov House, 1956); and many others whose names had to be omitted due to the lack of space.

Pushkin as "their own" ("moi Pushkin") and who perceived their own epoch—their personal lives, loves, and losses—as parallels to Pushkin's.

Perhaps no one at home or in exile made claim to Pushkin's legacy more faithfully than Nabokov. Born one hundred years after Pushkin, Nabokov adopted him as his personal muse and never abandoned that calling. He took Pushkin as his fellow traveler on every one of his literary journeys. Pushkin's presence extends from fleeting allusions to direct quotations (attributed and unattributed), from occasional motifs to entire themes and fully formulated aesthetic concepts. Nabokov liked to endow his favorite characters with a touch of Pushkin, and weighed the "fair, intelligence and talent" of Russian writers and critics on "Pushkin's scales," while exorcising from this sacred domain the "devils," such as the radical nineteenth-century critic Chernyshevsky.<sup>1</sup>

Nabokov's last Russian novel *The Gift*, his most ardent declaration of love for Russian literature, can be seen as a farewell to his twenty-year-long literary career in what he called his "docile Russian tongue." Yet even as an American writer, Nabokov returned to Pushkin as translator and scholar, devoting as many years of his life to *Eugene Onegin* as it took Pushkin to write it. Nabokov's translation, accompanied by three volumes of meticulous commentary, remains the most enduring monument raised to Pushkin on American soil.

Shortly after becoming an American writer, Nabokov translated two of Pushkin's *Little Tragedies*, "Mozart and Salieri" and "A Feast During the Plague."<sup>2</sup> In these philosophical dramas Pushkin experiments with the limits of the genre and probes into metaphysical territory in a manner close to that of Nabokov. Both of these "Little Tragedies" offer an obliging prism through which one can look into Nabokov's own poetics and metaphysics.

"Mozart and Salieri," based on the legend that Salieri poisoned his rival out of jealousy, is a "classical dramatization of the conflict between natural

1. See Sergei Davydov, "The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevskii," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 19, no. 3 (1985): 357-74; idem, "Weighing Nabokov's Gift on Pushkin's Scales," in Boris Gasparov, Robert P. Higgs, and Irina Paperno, eds., "Special Issue: Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism: From the Golden Age to the Silver Age," *California Slavic Studies* 15 (1992): 45-30; Sergei Davydov, "Nabokov and Pushkin," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 482-96; Monica Greenleaf, "Fathers, Sons and Impostors: Pushkin's Trace in *The Gift*," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 1 (1994): 140-58.

2. In Vladimir Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets: Translations of Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944).

genius and accomplished mediocrity."<sup>3</sup> The theme of an artist's envy of his more gifted rival reappears in a number of Nabokov's novels, in which pairs of unequal talents compete for supremacy and attempt to displace each other. To list some of the most obvious pairs: the cartoonist Rex and the blind Albinus (*Laugh*), the impresario Valentinov and the chess master Luzhin (*Invitation*), the murderer and writer Hermann and the painter Ardalion (*Des*), the virtuoso executioner M. Pierre and the poet Cincinnatus (*IB*). In *The Gift* the rivals are Fyodor and the more accomplished poet Konchetev, "whose mysteriously growing talent could have been checked only by a ringful of poison in a glass of wine"—a direct allusion to "Mozart and Salieri" (*Gift* 76). On a different level, Fyodor successfully restores Pushkin's poetic legacy, which the radical critic, Chernyshevsky, attempted to obliterate. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the younger brother V. loses his writerly contest with Sebastian Knight but triumphs easily over the hackneyed biographer Goodman. In *Lolita*, two artistic monsters, the Old World connoisseur of French literature and the "poshlosty" American playwright, lock horns over a nymphlet. In *Pale Fire* the insane commentator attempts to usurp not only the poet's work but even his death.

Like Salieri, the lesser artist often contemplates or actually commits an ethical or aesthetic crime against his rival, for which he will be ultimately punished. In Pushkin's tragedy, Salieri poisons Mozart, but until his death he will be tormented by Mozart's last words that "villainy and genius are two things that don't go together." Nabokov likes to test the validity of this maxim in his works. In Nabokov's universe true "poets do not kill"; rather, they die. But even as victims, the moral victory is theirs, while the villains are punished and their world shattered. Their punishment is often death, but even in the "afterlife" they are reminded by the unforgiving deity of their proper place: "[T]here is a green lane in Paradise where Humbert is permitted to wander at dusk once a year, but Hell shall never parole Hermann" (*Des* 9).

Salieri's foray against Mozart and heaven ("They say there is no justice on the earth. I know there is none in Heaven") evolves in Nabokov's novels into an arcane metaphysical drama. Nabokov models his cosmology as an analogy to poetics. The "anthropomorphic deity," the author, populates the pages of his novels with human-like creatures and endows them with a share of his own artistic and metaphysical intuition. Depending on their shrewdness, some characters begin to suspect the presence of the "deity" outside the novel, and

3. E. Wilson, "Introduction," in *ibid.*

several of them become aware of their inferior existence within the world in which they have to die as soon as the novel comes to its close. Beyond the book's covers, of course, looms the splendid reality, the "eternity" of their creator and their judge.

To write badly is a cardinal sin in Nabokov's universe, and the indignant author castigates those who dared to scribble their "poshlusty" opus inside his sacred text (stories "Lips to Lips," "Admiralty Spire"). Pushkin himself used this stratagem in *Eugene Onegin*: The jealous poet Lensky challenged Onegin to a duel and was killed. On the metapoetic level, the poet lost his duel to a more formidable rival, Pushkin himself, in whose exquisite verse novel Lensky dared to write his "obscure and limp" elegies: "Tak on pisal temno i vialo, Chto romantizmonn my zovem (Thus did he write, "obscurely" and "limply" [what we call romanticism—]?). (EO 1:237). Death is the just punishment for this impudence.

In the novel *Despair*, Hermann kills his double and writes a flawed detective tale about it. The deity rejects both of these sacrificial offerings and informs Hermann that the path to immortality through art is closed to him. Faced with such a prospect, Hermann rebels:

The nonexistence of God is simple to prove. Impossible to concede, for example, that a serious Jahn, all wise and almighty, could employ his time in such inane fashion as playing with manikins. . . . God does not exist, as neither does our hereafter, that second bogey being as easily disposed of as the first. (*Des* 101)

For this mock-Karamazovian sally the wrathful god *comes* Hermann with a disreputable "stick," drives him to despair, madness and jail, and reminds him that even in Hell there will be no parole.

To make it clear that artistic failure and blasphemy bode lethal consequences for the hero, Nabokov entitles his next novel *Invitation to a Beheading*. A pencil "as long as the life of any man except Cincinnatus" (*IB* 12) is all Nabokov gives his prisoner with which to face the gallant invitation. In the prison cell a poet is born who attempts to "write off" the edge of death. Cincinnatus even admits that he writes "obscurely and limply, like Pushkin's lyrical duelist" (*IB* 92): "Envious of poets. How wonderful it must be to speed along a page and, right from the page, where only a shadow continues to run, to take off into the blue" (*IB* 194). Thanks to his "criminal intuition," Cincinnatus soon learns to write like that. While acknowledging the supremacy of the script

that surrounds his scribbling, Cincinnatus begins to doubt the ontology of that world in which he is to die with Nabokov's last sentence. Only toward the end does Cincinnatus learn the simple and uncanny truth—that he cannot die because he is only a literary character, and that the only mortal being around is the author: "[A]nd it was somehow funny that eventually the author must needs die—and it was funny because the only real, genuinely unquestionable thing here was only death itself, the inevitability of the author's physical death" (*IB* 124). After this revelation, Cincinnatus crosses out his last written word, "death," and mounts the scaffold.

Cincinnatus's startling move catches his author unprepared. He hesitates to execute the smart little fellow whose ingenious art and metaphysical insight are worthy of his creator. With one hand, the demirge-author betrays the "turpid Gnostic," who declined the invitation and thus brought about the novel's collapse. With his other hand, the author-redeemer rescues his shrewd hero from the novel's debris for having passed the test in metaphysics. The character returns to his creator and earns his share of immortality: "Comme un fou se croit Dieu nous nous croyons mortels" (*IB* epigraph).

As the next title suggests, *The Gift* is a bildungsroman about aesthetic education. To become a poet, Fyodor has to identify the true father figures and purge the impostors.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the novel, Fyodor writes several works, each exceeding its predecessor in merit. Having reached perfect rapport with his progenitors and mentors—his father, Pushkin, and Nabokov—the disciple becomes the curator of their heritage. For his art and faith, Fyodor is rewarded with love, with the return of his father from beyond life and with the novel *The Gift*, which becomes Fyodor's own creation. Fyodor is the only character who is allowed to step out of the pages of a novel onto its cover, to become its author. Fyodor does not die as a result of this metamorphosis into the new installment of his life. On second reading of *The Gift*, Fyodor is already the "deity" beyond the book's covers. Somewhere in this congenial unity of the son and the father, of the inner and the outer text, of the character and his author, and, by implication, of a mortal and his Creator may lie the secret of Nabokov's metaphysics.

A well-known Russian writer, Boris Zaitsev, once said that Nabokov is a writer "who has neither any God, nor perhaps, any Devil."<sup>5</sup> Denis de Rougemont

4 Greenleaf, "Fathers."

5 Gleb Struve, *Russkaya literatura v izgnanii* (New York: Chekhov House, 1956), 287.

in his book *The Devil's Share* (quoted by Irena and Omry Ronen in their "diabolically evocative" piece) mentions a story of Jacob Boehme in which Satan, when asked, "Why did you leave Paradise?" answered, "I wanted to become an author."<sup>6</sup> Nabokov once said that "a creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty" (SO 32). A strong opinion such as this intimates indeed a certain "affinity between the creative impulse and the first disobedience."<sup>7</sup> However, it seems to me that Nabokov steers clear of the "Luciferian temptation." He is no Salieri grumbling against Heaven for shortchanging him, nor does he shake his fist against his "author" like Hermann. Nabokov is more like his favorite heroes, Cincinnatus and Pyodor, who create "along with," not "against," their creator. In a remarkable 1925 letter to his mother, Nabokov wrote: "I understand how God as he created the world found this a pure, thrilling joy. We are translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators, we dress up what he wrote, as a charmed commentator sometimes gives an extra grace to a line of genius."<sup>8</sup>

The recurring metaphor of "life as a text" is central to Nabokov's cosmology. In the poem "An Unfinished Draft" (1931), a poet muses that "human days are only / words on a page picked up by you / upon your way (a page ripped out— / where from?)" (PP 66–67). In "Ultima Thule," the artist Sinusov claims "that everything—life, patria, April, the sound of spring or that of a dear voice—is but a muddled preface, and that the main text still lies ahead," to which Father, who claims to possess some ultimate secret, replies: "Skip the preface!" (*Stories* 520–21). In *Pale Fire*, the poet John Shade jots down a "note for further use": "*Man's life as a commentary to abstuse Unfinished poem*" (PF II, 939–40). And in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the metaphor of "life as a text" gets its most exquisite treatment:

The answer to all questions of life and death, "the absolute solution" was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveller realising that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but a page in a book where mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence; the vowel

6. Denis de Rougemont, *The Devil's Share. An Essay on the Diabolic in Modern Society* (New York: Meridian Books, 1966): 131–32; Ronen and Ronen, "Diabolically," 376.

7. Ronen and Ronen, "Diabolically," 376.

8. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 245.

of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a round hand, as clear as that of one's father; trees conversing in dumb-show, making sense to one who has learnt the gestures of their language. . . . Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its sense is disclosed, and likewise, the intricate pattern of human life turns out to be monogrammatic, now quite clear to the inner eye disentangling the interwoven letters. (RLSK 178–9; emphasis added)

If a "page" is a metaphor of earthly life, then what is the "opus" from which it was torn?

Like Tolstoy, Nabokov has the eerie habit of pointing to some "book" at the moment his characters are about to die.<sup>9</sup> But rather than a "book of life," read to the last page, as was the case in Tolstoy, Nabokov's "book" has something to do with the passage to the next realm. It is sometimes written in an arcane tongue or exists only in the mind of the dying man. On the eve of his execution, Cincinnatus reads the novel *Quercus* and begins to laugh about the "inevitability of the author's physical death" (BF 124). A volume of Annenskii and Khodasevich are mentioned at the moment of Yasha Chernyshevsky's death (*Gift* 60). (Nabokov considered Khodasevich "the greatest Russian poet that the twentieth century has yet produced" [*Gift* 10]). Yasha's father, just moments before he dies, muses: "Funny that I have thought of death all my life, and if I have lived, I have lived only in the margin of a book I have never been able to read" (*Gift* 323). The last words of the nineteenth-century critic Chernyshevsky were: "A strange business: in this book there is not a single mention of God" (*Gift* 312).<sup>10</sup> A few moments before the greatest Russian poet, Pushkin, died, he asked his friend: "Raise me; let's go, higher, higher—well, come on!" Then, upon recovering, he continued: "I had a vision that I was climbing up on top of those books and bookcases with you, up high—and I got dizzy."<sup>11</sup>

9. In Tolstoy, such an enigmatic "book" appears at the moment of Anna Karenina's death. "The candle, by the light of which she had been reading that book filled with anxieties, deceptions, grief, and evil, flared up with a brighter light than before. It up for her all that had before been dark, flickered, began to grow dim, and went out for ever": Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, ed. G. Gibian, trans. A. Maude (New York: Norton, 1970), part 7, 10. Iurii Steklou, *N. G. Chernyshevskii: Ego zhizni i deiatel'nost'*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928), 2:637.

11. V. Veresev, *Pushkin v zhizni*, 2 vols., 6th ed. (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1936), 2:425–26; Ernest Simmons, *Pushkin*, 2nd ed. (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1971), 423.

The step from the "page" to the "main text" is a transcendental leap, a metamorphosis, accomplished through something that is akin to death but is not death. "We are the larvae of the angels," Nabokov mused in one of his early metaphysical poems:

Nay, Being is no murky riddle!

The moonlit dale is bright with dew

We are the larvae of the angels:

How sweet to gnaw on tender leaves!

Sprout bristles! Crawl, contort, grow sturdy!

The more voracious your green course,

the more like velvet, more like splendor

the tails of your unfolded wings. (*Stikhi* 105)

Dante used a similar image: "Perceive ye not that we are worms, / born to become angelic butterfly" ("noi siamo vermi / nati a formar l'angelica farfalla").<sup>12</sup> Metamorphosis, like mimicry, might be one of the Creator's gifts to His creatures. The entomologist Nabokov is a fierce anti-Darwinist who discards the notion that natural selection alone accounts for the miracles of mimicry. Rather, it was given to the creatures as an artistic gift with which to imitate and celebrate the patterns of His varicolored world (*SM* 125).<sup>13</sup>

If mimicry is an artistic gift, metamorphosis can be a metaphysical one. The transition from egg to larva to pupa, breaking through the coffin-like cocoon to become a magnificent butterfly or moth, does not involve death. In the story "Christmas," the soul of the dead son metamorphoses into a magnificent Indian moth (*Stories* 136), and in *Invitation to a Beheading*, on the eve of the execution, a beautiful moth shows Cincinnatus how to escape death (*IB* 203-4). In his essay "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," Nabokov spells out this conjecture without metaphors, in plain prose:

That human life is but a first installment of the serial soul and that one's individual secret is not lost in the process of earthly dissolution, becomes something more than an optimistic conjecture, and even more than a matter of religious faith, when we remember that only commonsense rules immortality out. (*LL* 377)

12. Dante, *Purgatory* X, ll. 124-26.

13. Cf. Alexandrov, *Otherworld*, 46.

Thus, the reintegration of the torn-out "page" into the original "volume" may well be the key metaphor for the "installment of the soul" onto some new and higher level of being, while death is only the platform from which one changes trains.

Some of Nabokov's characters, too, suspect "that the horror of death is nothing really, a harmless convulsion—perhaps even healthful for the soul," and that there once lived "sages who rejoiced at death" (*IB* 192). In the last chapter of *The Gift*, Pyodor discovers the ancient sage who gave Nabokov the quibbling epigraph for *Invitation to a Beheading*:

When the French thinker Delalande was asked at somebody's funeral why he did not uncover himself (*ne se découvrir pas*), he replied: "I am waiting for death to do it first (*qu'elle se découvre la première*). There is a lack of metaphysical gallantry in this, but death deserves no more. (*Gift* 321-22)

Shortly after *The Gift*, Nabokov translated Pushkin's philosophical tragedy, "A Feast During the Plague," whose heroes display an even greater "lack of metaphysical gallantry."<sup>14</sup> A congregation of young, life-thirsty men and women carouse while facing death point-blank. Wine and merriment is their last bastion against the onslaught of Thanatos. The Dionysian feast held among the corpses releases in the revellers a spontaneous eruption of creative Eros. The singers, dancers, and poets perform under the baton of their Chairman—himself a newborn poet—a highly artistic ritual. Through their exaltation of music, poetry, wine, and lovemaking on the brink of the grave, the revellers seem to have freed themselves from time-honored pieties.

Yet still, the memory of their Christian past lingers. The harlot Mary sings a ballad about her idyllic Scotland, when "our bonny church on Sundays / sss full of young and old" and "our happy children's voices / rang in the noisy school."<sup>15</sup> When the plague came, people mourned their dead and asked God to comfort their souls. For Mary's ancestors the vision of Paradise was attainable and attractive. Jenny, the song's heroine, knows that she will be reunited with her beloved after death. The Chairman acknowledges the Eden-like nature of the past, "the wild paradise of [Mary's] dear land."<sup>16</sup> He, too, knows

14. Pushkin's play is a translation of act 1, scene 4, of John Wilson's drama "City of the Plague" (1816). The Chairman's "Hymn to the Plague" is Pushkin's original poem.

15. Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets*, 12.

16. *Ibid.*, 13.

that there is an afterlife, for he is haunted by the shades of his late mother and wife. However, for him "who has been torn from a familiar world by some dark vision" their Paradise is lost: "Where am I? Sacred child of light, I see you / above me, on a shore where my wrecked soul / now cannot reach you." In his ecstatic "Hymn to the Plague," the Chairman proposes to his congregation a desperate and devious bid: to fool death by embracing it and thus attain some unprecedented, savage immortality.

...

There's bliss in battle and there's bliss  
on the dark edge of an abyss  
and in the fury of the main  
amid foam-crested death;  
in the Arabian hurricane  
and in the Plague's light breath.

All, all such mortal dangers fill  
a mortal's heart with a deep thrill  
of wordless rapture that bespeaks  
maybe, immortal life,  
—and happy is the man who seeks  
and tastes them in his strife.

And so, Dark Queen, we praise thy reign!  
Thou callest us, but we remain  
unruffled by the chill of death,  
clinking our cups, carefree,  
drinking a rose-lipped maiden's breath  
full of the Plague, maybe!<sup>17</sup>

An old Clergyman interrupts the feast and enjoins the apostates "by the holy wounds / of One Who bled upon the Cross to save us, — / break up your monstrous banquet, if you hope / to meet in heaven the dear souls of all those / you lost on earth."<sup>18</sup> He entrusts the Chairman with the sacred memory of his mother and wife, but the Chairman remains unperturbed. He rejects salvation in Christian terms and threatens to curse those who might follow the

17. *Ibid.*, 16.

18. *Ibid.*, 17.

priest. The finale is brief: "The Clergyman departs. The feast continues. The Chairman remains plunged in deep meditation."<sup>19</sup>

In the finale of *The Gift*, Ryodor, perhaps anticipating his liberation from the cocoon of the book and the next installment of his "serial soul," as the novel's author, quotes to Zina a curious passage from the cheerfully invented "elegant atheist," Pierre Delalande:

[T]here was once a man . . . he lived as a true Christian; he did much good, sometimes by word, sometimes by deed, and sometimes by silence; he observed the fasts; he drank the water of mountain valleys; . . . he nurtured the spirit of contemplation and vigilance; he lived a pure, difficult, wise life; but when he sensed the approach of death, instead of thinking about it, instead of tears of repentance and sorrowful partings, instead of monks and notary in black, he invited guests to a feast, acrobats, actors, poets, a crowd of dancing girls, three magicians, jolly Tollenburg students, a traveler from Taprobana [Ceylon], and in the midst of melodious verses, masks and music he drained a goblet of wine and died, with a carefree smile on his face. . . . Magnificent, isn't it? If I have to die one day that's exactly how I'd like it to be. (*Gift* 377)

Nabokov, who was himself baptized into the Christian faith, died without receiving the holy sacraments. He was cremated (a practice discouraged by the Orthodox church) and buried without Christian rites to the tunes of two arias from Puccini's *La Bohème* played by an organ.<sup>20</sup> No Byzantine symbols enhance the bluish marble slate at the Vevay cemetery. It says simply:

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

ECRIVAIN 1899–1977

In 1991, the ashes of Vera Nabokov joined his.

"Che gelida manina . . ." — "Si, Mi chiamano Mimi."

19. *Ibid.*, 19.

20. Professor Marina Ledkovsky, a relative of Nabokov's who was present at the ceremony, kindly shared this information with me. She also pointed out the "very Nabokovian" pattern of the date, name, and place—7/7/77. Vladimir Vladimirovich, Vevay. Dimitri Nabokov, who chose the music with his mother, told me that one day his ashes will be added to his parents' urn.