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The Return of Feb

Nabokov's Lepidoptera

The central place of Lepidoptera in Nabokov's life and art is discussed.

In 1988, *Voprosy literatury* published a translation of Alfred Appel's interview of Vladimir Nabokov, in which Vladimir Vladimirovich mentioned that an illustration of the butterfly *Parnassius mnemosyne* would grace the endpaper of the revised edition of his memoirs, *Speak, Memory.* The Russian translation of this interview came with a reference that explained, with the ultimate scholarly rigor, what Parnassus was, who lived there, and what Mnemosyne's family relationship with those residents was. It concluded with the assertion that this was: "An invented Latin name that may be translated as 'Parnassian memoress.'"[1]

O Black Apollo (in English, O Clouded Apollo), how could those ignoramuses have dared insult you like that! Was it not you, you "strange butterflies of ancient lineage, with rustling, glazed, semi-transparent wings and catkin-like flossy abdomens,"[2] that a thirteen-year-old entomologist chased on the banks of the Oredezh? Was it not with you that, a quarter-century later, he populated the riverside meadows, rife with scabiosas, of the Gudunov-Cherdyntsev estate?[3]

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That clumsy mistake would hardly have surprised Vladimir Vladimirovich, though. The militant indifference of Russian humanities scholars to the natural sciences was only too familiar to him: "Maybe because 'pure science' only depressed or amused the intellectual-in-the-street . . . but with respect to my butterflies, I recall only incomprehension, irritation, and mockery," he wrote (*DB,* p. 75). But when did Russia's educated class buy into this disdain, where did it come upon this selective blindness to those "cherished details" (*DB,* p. 31) of nature? Nabokov knows exactly where to lay the blame, claiming that Chernyshevskii

> was unable to name a single wild flower except the wild rose; and it is characteristic that his deficiency of botanical knowledge was immediately made up by a "generalization" when he maintained with the conviction of an ignoramus that "they [the flowers of the Siberian taiga] are all just the same as those which bloom all over Russia!" There lurks a secret retribution for the fact that he who had constructed his philosophy on a basis of knowing the world was now placed, naked and alone, amidst the bewitched, strangely luxuriant, and still incompletely described nature of northeast Siberia. (*D,* p. 220 [*G/MS,* pp. 255–56])

From the naturalist's point of view, there is an insuperable divide between the Russian classics and the literature of Soviet (and post-Soviet) times. While the Russian writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were great connoisseurs of what Nabokov called "Aksakovian-Turgenevan wildlife" (*DB,* p. 45), in the Soviet epoch it became fashionable to write with the facility of a Chernyshevskii about unknown quantities. Interestingly, this divide between pre- and post-revolutionary Russian writers is utterly unrelated to the quality of their prose, style, and political sympathies. Vasilii Grossman and Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Chingiz Aitmatov all make ridiculous errors in their descriptions of the natural world, and the wordsmiths of the younger generation are even worse. An interest in nature in the Russian classics was closely associated with hunting, with the manorial way of life—an association that Nabokov sees as clearly as can be. It is no coincidence that he calls his pursuit of butterflies a "hunt" or an "open season." In one of his "Anniversary Notes," he writes: "I greatly appreciate being with A.P. [Chekhov—Trans.] in the same boat—on a Russian lake, at sunset, he fishing, I watching the hawkmoths above the water."[4]

The appearance of butterflies in Nabokov's works is mysteriously linked with death. Sleptsov's inner monologue (in the story "Christmas" [Rozhdestvo]) breaks off on the word "death," where he is interrupted by

a great *Attacus* moth emerging from its cocoon. Cincinnatus, in *Invitation to a Beheading* [Priglashenie na kazn, having begun a clean sheet of paper with the one word "death," which he crossed out as soon as it was written, is distracted from his writing by a Giant Peacock Moth (*Saturnia pyri*) that later, after the protagonist's execution, would be able to escape to freedom through the cell's broken window. In the final chapter of *King, Queen, Knave* [Korol, Dama, Valet], a "white butterfly" (a banal Cabbage White, maybe?) flits above the beach. A swarm of white moths (*Geometridae?*) and vivid exotic butterflies circles over the dead Pilgram in the story that bears his name. "The Aurelian," the story's title in English,* is a play on words: the main meaning is "lepidopterist" but the secondary meaning attaches to the adjectival form of *aurelia*, which is "chrysalis." That off-the-wall association is given a direct embodiment atypical of Nabokov in an early poem of 1923: "We are the caterpillars of angels."[5] And in the story "Wingstroke" [Udar kryla], an angel is compared to a moth: "The brown fur of the wings steamed, iridescent with frost . . . [T]he angel propped itself on its palms like a sphinx."[6] (*Sphinx* is the Latin name for the genus of the Hawk Moth.) In this story, the protagonist hides the stunned angel in a wardrobe from which the celestial being escapes unharmed, like the young Nabokov's first butterfly, a Swallowtail, once did. But the Noctuid fluttering around a lamp, "a swift upsilamba, in insane alarm / circling all about the room," becomes in a Nabokov poem a fearsome guest, a "tiny angel of night."[7] The poet also addresses a Camberwell Beauty: "Yes, I recognize you in a Seraph, of miraculous encounter, / I recognize your wings, that holy tracery!"[8] Comparable examples could be cited one after another . . . The winged denizens of heaven and lepidoptera, the unattainable paradise of childhood, Russia and studies in entomology—these themes are interwoven time and again in Nabokov's oeuvre.

It may be concluded that butterflies have an important part to play in Nabokov's metaphysical system, in that they help to trace a visible pattern on the membrane separating the mundane from a higher reality, which speaks to the initiated of the primordial dispensation.

Nabokov himself offered a literal explanation of the strange connection between butterflies and the other world in *Drugie berega* [*Other Shores,*

*It was translated by Nabokov and Peter Pertzov for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1941; available at www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1941/11/the-aurelian/306224/. The two versions differ enormously.—Trans.

the Russian version of the *Speak, Memory* autobiography—Trans.].

In the spring of 1917, an attack of appendicitis sent him into surgery, and while under the ether, he saw himself as a small boy spreading a freshly caught *Saturnia pavonia:*[9] "although it was not especially amusing that the one being spread and picked apart was none other than I" (*DB,* p. 72). A little less than six decades later, Nabokov wrote to Samuil Rosov, a classmate at the Tenishev School,[10] that after the operation he had resolved never again to go under full anesthesia because it gave him the worst possible nightmares. It may be assumed that the dream of the *Saturnia* on the stretching board had a terrifying sequel that had been somewhat expurgated in *Drugie berega.*

Sometimes the link between butterflies and the other world is less evident, indicated only elliptically. Butterflies appear for just an instant in the first chapter of *The Gift,* in a poem with which no naturalist could find fault that is permeated with the air of a Northern spring:

> The snow, gone from the slopes, lurks in ravines,
> And the Petersburg spring
> Is full of excitement and of anemones
> And of the first butterflies.
> But I don't need last year's Vanessas,
> Those bleached hibernators,
> Or those utterly battered Brimstones,
> Through transparent woods flying.
> I shall not fail, though, to detect
> The four lovely gauze wings
> Of the softest Geometrid moth in the world
> Spread flat on a mottled pale birchtrunk.
> [*G/MS,* p. 36]

The poem is bookended by two important pieces of information, being preceded by an unexpectedly precise date ("we are preparing to return to the country, where we might move as early as April in the years before I began school") and followed immediately by Nabokov telling us that Fedor Konstantinovich did not include that poem in his collection because "once again, the theme is connected with that of his father" (*D,* p. 23 [*G/MS,* p. 36]).

Then that vernal landscape crumbles away into details, like pieces of a puzzle. But a fragment of it ("April's limpidity," the wet birches)

(*D,* pp. 44–45 [*G/MS*, p. 59]) returns later, to provide an unexpected Russian backdrop to Yasha Chernyshevski's suicide in Germany [*G/MS*, p. 60].[11]

The theme of poetry arises again in chapter 2, where the phenology of a Petersburg spring is supplemented by yet another encounter with the already familiar Common Brimstone, which this time is flying above the city: "On the Nevski Avenue, during the last days of March, when the wooden blocks of the spacious street pavements gleamed dark blue from the damp and the sun, one might see, flying high over the carriages, along the façades of the houses, past the city hall, past the lindens in the square, past the statue of Catherine, the first yellow butterfly" [*G/MS,* p. 119]. And, "At the beginning of April, to open the season, the members of the Russian Entomological society used to make a traditional trip to the other side of Black River, in a suburb of St. Petersburg, where in a birch grove which was still naked and wet, still showing patches of holey snow, there occurred on the trunks, its feeble transparent wings pressed flat against the papery bark, our favorite rarity, a specialty of the province" (*D,* p. 97 [*G/MS,* p. 119])[12]—that "softest Geometrid moth in the world." There is, of course, nothing random about this reference to the Black River in *The Gift,* saturated as it is with Pushkinian allusions. The fourfold repetition of the date (of late March or early April) is also a regular feature of Nabokov's prose.

The Gift begins on April 1, 1926.[13] Vadim Stark has shown that Nabokov's first novel, *Mashenka,* opens on Sunday March 31, 1924, Old Style.* On the following day, April 1, Ganin learns that Mashenka is the wife of Alferov, his neighbor. And Herr Dorn, the landlord of the rooming house where the characters live, had, also according to Stark and judging by the pages left in a partially used desk calendar, died between March 21 and April 1, 1922.[14]

What are these dates—the end of March and the beginning of April—that recur so often in Nabokov's prose? Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, the writer's father, had been killed on March 28, 1922,[15] and buried on April 1. The circumstances of the elder Nabokov's tragic end are well known. An assassination attempt was made on Pavel Nikolaevich Miliukov in Berlin. Vladimir Dmitrievich was standing nearby, and when

*When Nabokov was working with Michael Glenny on the translation of *Mary* in 1970, he insisted that the Old Style (Julian) calendar be replaced by its New Style (Gregorian) counterpart.—Trans.

he laid the terrorist who had fired the shot out with a well-aimed punch and was trying to disarm him, a second terrorist shot him three times in the back. This was a duel with no rules—a despicable murder. In a poem about his father's death, Vladimir Nabokov describes that tragic Berlin spring in the same tones as he would later use of the Petersburg spring in *The Gift:* "I see a radiant cloud, I see a rooftop glisten / like a mirror, far away," and, later, "And yet, if every stream anew the wonder sings, / and yet, if every falling golden thaw-drop rings— / if these are not bedazzling lies."[16] The poem is titled "Easter" [Paskha], and it was written during the Easter vacation, his last before graduating from Cambridge University.

And here another kind of tracery comes filtering through. Describing that search for "our favorite rarity," the protagonist of *The Gift* remarks that "I can recall especially clearly the figure of the general (X.B. Lambovski [X.B. are Rrussian letters that stand for Khristos Voskres (Christ Is Risen!)—Ed.; Baranovskii in the original Russian—Trans.]—there was something Paschal about him) . . . next to the figure of my father . . . both were carefully examining in search of pupae a handful of reddish earth dug up with a trowel" (*D,* p. 97 [*G/MS,* pp. 119– 20]).

The route taken by the Common Brimstone over Petersburg in spring is probably no coincidence either. Before the first Revolution, in 1905, and shortly after the October coup of 1917, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov was an elected deputy in the St. Petersburg Duma, located where Nevskii Avenue crossed Dumskaya Street.[17] (The "square" and the "Catherine statue" are farther down the Nevskii, toward the Nikolaev Railroad Station.) It may be that this first butterfly of spring is not only a harbinger of the imminent departure to the country but also is pointing out to the Nabokov brothers the path they will take into exile from their house in Crimea in the fall of 1917.[18]

All of that recurrent tracery—the April landscape, the Brimstone, the Geometrid—is associated with the protagonist's father: that same landscape and a suicide so like the strange, inverted duel; the Brimstone flying through vernal Petersburg, past the building where Nabokov's father spent so much of his time; and the entomologists searching for a little Geometrid Moth in an April birch grove near the site of Pushkin's duel. And then, the conclusion of that theme in *The Gift*—the execution of the protagonist's father, Konstantin Kirillovich Godunov-Cherdyntsev:

> Did they shoot him in the ladies' room of some godforsaken station (broken looking glass, tattered plush) or did they lead him out into some kitchen

> garden one dark night and wait for the moon to peep out? How did he wait with them in the dark? With a smile of disdain? And if a whitish moth had hovered among the shadowy burdock he would, even at that moment, I *know,* have followed it with that same glance of encouragement. (*D,* p. 124 [*G/MS,* p. 149])

The threads of the plot are tied neatly up once more: the same thing that the butterfly hunters were seeking so intently by the Black River captures Godunov-Cherdyntsev Sr.'s last gaze, and the rays of that spring morning in St. Petersburg focus on one point—a whitish moth that shines an inscrutable light into the Bolsheviks' dark, moonless night. And the last piece of the mosaic falls into place, with an execution, a father, and that same little Geometrid.

It is likely that *Gonepteryx rhamni* (the Common Brimstone) was also intimately associated with Nabokov's memory of his father. In Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov's widely known letters written to his wife from the Kresty Prison in St. Petersburg [in 1908—Trans.], edited and published by his son, the writer, in 1965 in the American almanac *Aerial Ways* [Vozdushnye puti], there is the phrase "Tell him ["Volodia"] that here in the garden there are no butterflies at all other than *rhamni* [Brimstones] and *P. brassicae* [Cabbage Whites]."[19] But two decades prior to this publication, Nabokov's sister, Elena Vladimirovna (Sikorskaia by marriage) had quoted that same line from their father's letter in a letter to her brother, where it sounds completely different: "Tell Laudy that I saw a Cabbage White in the prison yard."[20] Vladimir Vladimirovich replied in his letter back to his sister that the butterfly that had flown to his father into the prison yard "settled itself on my cuff."[21] But there is no mention of a Brimstone in the line as quoted by Elena Sikorskaia.[22] Aware as she was of her brother's punctilious precision in all that related to butterflies, this mistake of hers is hard to believe. In one letter, she writes: "[O]ne person was asking how Petersburg Province could be part of the Apollo's range . . . I was outraged at his suggestion of a slip of the pen or an error! I told him that such a thing simply could not happen with you."[23] But if there is no doubt that she is citing her father's letter precisely, it remains only to assume that when editing his father's letter, Vladimir Vladimirovich somewhat unceremoniously transposed the Common Brimstone from his own cuff to the yard at Kresty.

The quality of Nabokov's lepidopterous images is as good as any produced by a Faber pencil [*SM/EL,* p. 24]. Here is an example. When Pilgram is dickering with Sommer, he remembers that the last time he had

made a large sum of money just before a bump in the inflation rate was when he sold a cabinet containing a certain genus of butterfly the names of whose species related to love: "chosen one" [*izbrannitsa*], "betrothed" [*narechennaia*], "spouse" [*supruga*], fornicatrix" [*preliubodeika*] . . . "Fornicatrix? Yes, *adultera.* This is the *Catocala adultera* that the young Nabokov came racing in to show his father in *Drugie berega* (*DB,* p. 78 [*SM/EL,* p. 103]). The *Catocala* genus of large moths is now normally called *underwing*. But there did persist for about a century and a half among entomologists a tradition, begun by Linnaeus himself, of giving the underwing species Latin names associated with love.

Nabokov did not care to unriddle these butterfly-related brainteasers for his readers, any more than he did the other puzzles he set. But there are a couple of exceptions, one of which is when Pnin and Chateau, visiting Kukolnikov's estate, come upon a flock of small, sky-blue butterflies on a river bank. In four separate letters (and, later, in a short note for the *New York Times Magazine*), Vladimir Vladimirovich pointed out that these were actually Karner Blues (*Lycaeides melissa samuelis Nabokov*), first described by Nabokov himself in 1943.[24]

There was careful preparation for this encounter between Timofey Pnin, Nabokov's most engaging protagonist, and Nabokov's most favorite godchild, as he called the *samuelis* (*DB*, p. 80). Pnin drives slowly into "the grove of old, disheveled, curiously authentic-looking pines," the biotope of Nabokov's favorite, just after turning "into a sandy avenue, bordered with wild lupines,"[25] its preferred food plant. Then Pnin and Chateau's encounter with the butterflies unexpectedly brings the reader face to face with the author: "'Pity Vladimir Vladimirovich is not here,' remarked Chateau. 'He would have told us about these enchanting insects.'"[26]

The appearance of the author himself, preceded by a whole swarm of his most favorite butterflies, is undoubtedly significant. Nabokov's dogged insistence that they were Karner Blues requires explanation, since that butterfly could only have been correctly identified after close microscopic examination of the fragile genital armature at the tip of a male specimen's abdomen. So, even had Vladimir Vladimirovich been present at the conversation between Pnin and Chateau, he would have had to retreat to his laboratory in order to ascertain which of the blue butterflies his characters had frightened into flight.

The Pines, the Kukolnikov estate, is located in one of New England's most beautiful states. Nabokov lived and worked in New England, and

hunted butterflies during three seasons there. In 1940 and 1942, he and his family were guests at the West Wardsboro summer home of Mikhail Karpovich, a Harvard history professor and Kukolnikov's prototype, in Vermont.[27] The summer of 1946 was specifically devoted to catching a *samuelis,* which he knew only from museum specimens, around Newfound Lake in New Hampshire.[28] But neither in Vermont nor in New Hampshire did he find any Karner Blues*;* it was later discovered that, due to deforestation and habitat destruction, it had disappeared from those states (and from all of New England) in the mid-twentieth century. We therefore come to an unexpected conclusion that in my view also offers a hint as to the meaning of this entire exercise, which is that in the world of Nabokov's novel, Pnin and Chateau do something that their creator could only dream of—they come upon a butterfly that they could never have seen in real life.

But, to continue my interrupted observations on the dialogue between Pnin and Chateau: "I have always had the impression that his entomology was merely a pose," is Pnin's commentary on the preoccupation of a colleague who is simultaneously his creator. "'Oh no,' said Chateau. 'You will lose it some day,' he added, pointing to the Greek Catholic cross on a golden chainlet that Pnin had removed from his neck and hung on a twig. . . . 'Perhaps I would not mind losing it,' said Pnin."[29]

Here arises the third key element of the "tracery"—the theme of lost faith, which links the scene with the little blue butterflies to the scene that follows. Gripped by proliferating visions of the endless deaths suffered in his mind by his beloved, who was most likely tortured to death in a Nazi concentration camp and of whose ultimate fate nothing is reliably known, Pnin is walking along a path toward the forest and the river.[30] He is, in fact, going to the very spot where he and Chateau had been earlier that day: "Pnin slowly walked under the solemn pines. The sky was dying. He did not believe in an autocratic God. He did believe, dimly, in a democracy of ghosts. The souls of the dead, perhaps, formed committees, and these, in continuous session, attended the destinies of the quick."[31] But, since Nabokov always avoided publicly discussing the theme of faith lost (or gained), I will steer clear of it too.

This—or something like this—was how I spoke about Nabokov's butterflies twenty years ago, at No. 47 Bolshaia Morskaia Street, which had just been wrested away from some branch of Soviet officialdom to set up a Nabokov Museum. Vadim Petrovich Stark, chairman of the Nabokov Foundation, had not invited me, a zoologist, to the April

conference because anyone was especially interested in my observations on Nabokov's butterflies. Stark knew, though, that the Nabokov Museum was about to receive a present.

I had two trips scheduled for the summer of 1989. In August, I was to go on what was in those days a routine expedition to Tian-Shan. But awaiting me in September and October was a journey in whose reality I could not altogether believe—to the United States. Now that sounds much more run-of-the-mill than the peaks of Ile-Alatau, but back then it was unheard-of. How can I explain something like this to globetrotters like you? How much does life change when you know that there are places on this earth that are hidden from you, that you can yearn for but will never see? I will never forget what a friend told me once: "I can easily prove that Paris is more distant than the moon," she said. "I see the moon just about every night, but Paris I never see." And there were others who had never even been to Europe but could, as effortlessly as a phantom unbidden, journey around Paris in their dreams. Our inner map of the imagination was deformed by a fantastic distorting mirror, in which London was far more distant from Moscow than Irkutsk, although in actuality the exact opposite was true. But now the globe is a lot rounder than it used to be, although new poles of inaccessibility have appeared. I remember a cherished terrace overlooking a gorge straight out of paradise, in southwestern Turkmenia. At the time, that place was a Mecca for entomologists from all over the Soviet Union. The Autocrator, the Alexanor, the Madder Hawk Moth, the *Brahmaea chrisophi,* the *Zegris fausti,* and the Danaidae—every evening the wondrous names of marvelous butterflies wove themselves into our leisurely conversations. That was where I heard for the first time, from my friend, a Petersburg artist, naturalist, and snake hunter, lines that had yet to be published in Russia: "We are the caterpillars of angels . . . / Array yourself in thorns, crawl, bend, grow strong / and the greedier was your green progress, / the more velvety and more lovely / the trailing edges of wings set free." Even now I can still hear his deep voice rising over the accompaniment of crickets, the murmur of a village stream, and the distant howling of jackals. It was he, Rostislav Danov, who coined the deathless witticism: "I can't allow myself to die before I see Borneo." "Pilgram," needless to say, was our favorite story. Its protagonist seemed to us almost happy, and death on the threshold of achieving a dream appeared far sweeter than facing the utter impossibility of ever coming even close to that dream.

As I looked forward to my trip, I could already feel behind my back

"the trailing edges of wings set free," although what lay ahead was not an opened window but a door flung wide. Not just one, in fact, but many. (Because in those far-fabled days, the phrase "I have just flown in from Russia" opened any door in the West.) In a word, the change in our life was sensed as a gigantic metamorphosis. And we were fooled into thinking that this was it: we had hatched, and it would be nothing but freedom and happiness from now on. Even so, the fancy concocted a whole host of obstacles destined to thwart the dream. The trip was threatened by a swarm of picayune details, closing in, their stingers at the ready—a misprint in a passport, maybe, or a broken leg all of a sudden, or stolen tickets, or, finally, an insinuatingly severe voice: "Mr. Formozov, your exit visa has been canceled. An annoying error has been committed, which, we assure you, will not happen again." Where was the antidote against all those niggling stings of fate that were everywhere in flights of fancy? There had to be a goal, a mission even, so that the trip would not be important in and of itself but was being made for the sake of something. And at that point, how could I not remember the Swallowtail,[32] the first butterfly that the novice entomologist of Vyra let slip: "and presently [it] was but a golden speck dipping and dodging and soaring eastward . . . and beyond the gaunt Ural range to Yakutsk and Verkhne Kolymsk, and from Verkhne Kolymsk, where it lost a tail [*shpora,* more literally rendered "spur"—Trans.],[33] to the fair Island of St. Lawrence and across Alaska . . . to be finally overtaken and captured, after a forty-year race" (*DB,* p. 71 [*SM/EL,* p. 91; see also *G/MS,* p. 145—Trans.]). So the goal of my trip became to assist that Swallowtail in making its way back home. That was my little piece of sorcery to help the journey come off.

After that, everything was simple. Using a glass (a purely Nabokovian ploy, even though I had as yet read neither his correspondence with Edmund Wilson nor the Boyd biography), I captured, on the windows of the snug biological station that stands amid ancient colonnades of Schrenk's spruces above the eternally indigo Big Almaty Lake, a dozen or so famously rare high-country Noctuids. The jewel of my little collection was a *Catolaca* (yes, one of those with a love connection). Blinded by the neon of a city streetlight, the bloodshot ocelli on one of its inferior wings peered at me from below the superior wings' trembling, fuzzy lids. And I will bet my life that this happened just a stone's throw from the little ravine where a "progressive schoolmistress" had once incinerated Godunov-Cherdyntsev Sr. with a gaze full of reproach (*D,* p. 98 [*G/MS,* p. 121]).

At the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology, I found myself in the very room where Nabokov had worked.

Here I have to break briefly into my account of Nabokov's butterflies and say a few words about Nabokov the entomologist. Recent years have seen three monographs published on the subject, as well as a collection of Nabokov's own works with extensive commentaries. For many years, from childhood on, Nabokov devoted all his free time to butterflies and moths—or, more accurately, to catching them or, as he called it, *lovitva*.* Entomological expeditions and lepidoptera research also played a special role during his early years in the United States. He spent up to four days a week, sometimes even fourteen hours a day, in museums with collections of lepidoptera. He literally wore himself out with his entomological studies, and the original method he developed for researching butterfly wing design is so labor-intensive that no one has ever used it since. Plus, the work was entirely unpaid at first; only after a time did the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology start giving him a small stipend, although that $1,000 (later increased to $1,200) a year did little to feed a family of three. But butterflies did help him make the painful transition from Russian to English. With their aid and thanks to his intensive involvement in lepidopterology, he was able to tame a rebellious Russian muse that was forever straining to be free. He believed that the training he got from scientific articles was the last push to the robust health and independence that his English prose needed. From 1920 through 1976, he published twenty-five articles and notes on entomology, beginning with lengthy single-subject articles and ending with an ecstatic six-line review on a new field guide that he had read in the hospital a year before his death. At the end of his life, Nabokov acknowledged to his son that he had done everything he wanted to do in literature but most of his entomological projects (no less than six on my count) remained uncompleted or not even begun. He never joined any literary associations or groups but was a member of several entomological societies until the day he died. He did not reply to letters from admirers of his prose in the Soviet Union but he did correspond with Soviet entomologists (with one, at least—Yuri Nekrutenko, a specialist in Blues and Crimean butterflies).

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*A neologism derived from *lovlia* (to hunt or to catch) and *bitva* (battle), which in this context may be considered the equivalent of "lepping."—Trans.

At the Harvard Museum, and thanks to the good offices of zoologist colleagues, I was easily able to exchange my modest Tian-Shan acquisitions for priceless specimens from the Nabokov collection.

So here I am, on Bolshaia Morskaia Street. And I am holding a yellow entomological box filled with treasures festively brought over by me.

There is a *Limenitis arthemis,* the American relative of the black-and-white beauty in *The Gift* and *Speak, Memory.* In the spring of 1942, describing "a supernaturally smooth arc" (*D,* p. 70; *D,* p. 120 [*G/MS,* pp. 90, 144; see also *SM/EL,* p. 102—Trans.]),[34] it had descended onto a path at Wellesley College where Nabokov adroitly snatched it up in his cap.

And there are two specimens of the Pearl-Bordered *Boloria selene tollandiensis* (Barnes and Banj), both caught by Vladimir and Dmitri Nabokov, father and son, in Colorado in 1947. The label reads "Moraine Pk & Long's Pk. Inn Estes Park":

> There came a July day—around 1910, I suppose—when I felt the urge to explore the vast marshland beyond the Oredezh. . . . [A] dusky little Fritillary . . . passed in low, skimming flight. . . I caught the subtle perfume of butterfly wings on my fingers, a perfume which varies with the species—vanilla, or lemon, or musk, or a musty, sweetish odor difficult to define. . . . At last I saw I had come to the end of the marsh. The rising ground beyond was a paradise of lupines, columbines, and pentstemons. Mariposa lilies bloomed under Ponderosa pines. In the distance, fleeing cloud shadows dappled the dull green of slopes above timber line, and the gray and white of Longs Peak" (*DB*, p. 78 [*SM/EL,* pp. 105–6].*

And there is *Syngrapha angulidens* that Nabokov caught on August 5, 1943 at Alta in Utah: "with eyes like burning coals, vibrating, flying up and falling again—and a large, brightly illumed, unhurriedly skillful hand, with almond-shaped fingernails, rakes noctuid after noctuid into the killing jar" (*D,* p. 108 [*G/MS*, p. 131]).

And a Yucca Moth from the *Prodoxidae* family, described by Nakobov as *Pronuba.* In the annotated *Lolita,* he notes that this is the creature that Humbert Humbert mistakes for "creeping white flies."[35] (Here is the second butterfly puzzle that he unriddles for his readers.)

And two more ocellated hawkmoths of the genus *Smerinthus,* one caught at the Karpovich's summer home in West Wardsboro and the other on June 30, 1943, at Alta, Utah. Within a very few days (on July

*The Russian revision, which differs quite substantially from the English original quoted here, ends with "I had wandered far."—Trans.

7, 1943), Edmund Wilson wrote to Nabokov, asking him to identify the drawing of a butterfly that John Dos Passos had recently brought to him, which also proved to be a variety of ocellated hawkmoth.[36] In the then-new novel *Bend Sinister,* Nabokov transplants the moth from Wilson's sketch to the young heroine's hand in the summer of 1943: "Very slowly, rosewise, you opened your hands. There, clinging with all its six fluffy feet to the ball of your thumb, the tip of its mouse-grey body slightly excurved, its short, red, blue-ocellated inferior wings oddly protruding forward from beneath the sloping superior ones which were long and marbled and deeply notched."[37] The ocellated hawkmoths display their staring eyes, fake but expressive, to scare away birds. But Nabokov seems to have wanted to achieve the opposite—to attract the predatory gaze of the seasoned American critic, one of the book's first readers. But, as sometimes happens with hawkmoths too, the trick failed: Wilson did not care for the novel at all.[38]

And here is a whole azure swarm of blues—the subspecies described by Nabokov, *Lycaeides melissa pseudosamuelis* Nabokov, 1949, the *Plebejus icaricia icarioides* he caught in Wyoming in July 1952, and the *Lycaeides argyrognomon anna* (Edwards) from California. Regarding the latter two, Nabokov proved that they both belong to the species *L. argyrognomon* rather than to *L. melissa,* as had been believed prior to his research.

And finally, an Apollo—*Parnassius phoebus golovinus* (in Russian, *Apollon Feb*), whose range "stitches together" the Old and the New Worlds. He soars over the mountains of Siberia and then, having chosen not to linger over the crimson peaks of Kolyma and Chukotka, he finds himself (oh, the dream of every escapee from Siberia!) already above the Bering Strait and then makes a sharp turn to the south, passing over Ashland, Oregon, and Afton, Wyoming. And all so that, on June 28, 1943, he would land on a wayside flower (at Alta, Utah) and be skimmed from it by a deft sweep of the Nabokovian net. Yes, it is "far to the meadows"[39] where his brother once slipped out from under just such another muslin pouch to fly free again. And on his long journey, he lost . . . no, not a spur; Apollos do not have much use for spurs . . . but, in migrating from one language to another and by dint of being transmogrified into an American toponym, he lost the first "n" in the subspecies name, which had originally harked back to the renowned Russian admiral, Vasilii Mikhailovich Golov*n*in.[40]

I hand them all over to the museum. Light pours through the windows on Bolshaia Morskaia Street. The Feb—the gleaming, sunny Apollo—has returned at last to the Nabokov family home.

Notes

1. Vladimir Nabokov, "Interviu Alfredu Appeliu," *Voprosy literatury,* 1988, no. 10, p. 184. Translation and foreword by M. Meilakh; reprinted from *Nabokov: The Man and His Work,* ed. L.S. Dembo (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967).

2. V.V. Nabokov, *Drugie berega* (Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1989), p. 113. Subsequent references to this edition will be given as "*DB*" with the page number. [The English here is from *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Knopf/Everyman's Library, 1999), p. 164. References to this edition will be given as "*SM/EL*" with the page number. There are substantial differences between the English original and the Russian version of Nabokov's autobiography; some translations will therefore be made directly from the Russian.—Trans.]

3. V.V. Nabokov, *Dar* (Moscow: Slovo, 1990), p. 88. Subsequent references to this edition will be given as "*D*" with the page number. [Direct quotations from this work will be given, in Michael Scammell's translation, *The Gift* (New York: Capricorn/Putnam's, 1970), as "*G/MS*" with the page number; this present quotation is from p. 110.—Trans.]

4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 286.

5. Vladimir Nabokov, "Net, bytie—ne zybkaia zagadka!" in Nabokov, *Stikhotvorenie* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1991), p. 66.

6. Vladimir Nabokov, "Udar kryla," *Zvezda,* 1996, no. 11, p. 19. [Translation from "Wingstroke," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Random House/First Vintage International Edition, 1997), p. 38.—Trans.]

7. Vladimir Nabokov, "Sam treugolnyi, dvukrylyi, beznogii . . . (1932)," in Nabokov, *Stikhotvorenie,* p. 165.

8. Vladimir Nabokov, "Babochka (*Vanessa antiopa*)," in Nabokov, *Gornii put* (Berlin: Grani, 1923), p. 142.

9. The species (the Small Emperor Moth) was specified in Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Wideview/Perigee, 1979), p. 121. [The passage that follows was rendered in *Speak, Memory* thus: "It was all there, brilliantly reproduced in my dream, while my own vitals were being exposed" (*SM/EL,* p. 91).—Trans.]

10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters: 1940–1977,* ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 554. The Russian original of this letter (dated January 31, 1976) has never been published.

11. The connection between the suicide of an aspiring poet in *The Gift* and a poet's death in a duel in *Evgenii Onegin* is studied in detail by Aleksandr Aleksandrovich Dolinin, "Dve zametki o romane 'Dar,'" *Zvezda,* 1996, no. 11, p. 169.

12. None of Petersburg Province's butterflies and moths are endemic to the area (information supplied by Andrei Valentinovich Sviridov, curator of the Lepidoptera Collection at Moscow State University's Zoological Museum). Our northern climes are impoverished in that regard. Even *Eupithecia petropolitanata*, "the specialty of the province," so vividly embodied in the young butterfly hunter's imagination in *Drugie berega* [*SM/EL,* p. 104], does not exist in nature.

13. Aleksandr Dolinin, "Kommentarii," in Nabokov, *Selected Prose and Verse. Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Raduga, 1990), p. 624.

14. Vadim Stark, "V.Sh., ili Muza Nabokova," *Iskusstvo Leningrada,* 1991, no. 3, pp. 23–24.

15. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 192–93.

16. Vladimir Nabokov, "Paskha," in Nabokov, *Stikhotvorenie,* p. 49. [Translation by Dmitri Nabokov, in Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), p. 9.—Trans.]

17. I.V. Gessen, *V dvukh vekakh. Zhiznennyi opyt. Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii, izdannyi I.V. Gessenom,* vol. 22 ([n.p., 1937]). Quoted from *Russkii arkhiv,* vol. 11 (21–22) (Moscow: Terra, 1993), p. 208.

18. Boyd, *The Russian Years,* p. 134.

19. "Pisma V.D. Nabokova iz Krestov k zhene. 1908 g.," in *Vozdushnye puti,* vol. 4, ed. and published by R.N. Greenberg (New York, 1965), p. 272.

20. "E.V. Sikorskaia–V.V. Nabokovu ot 1 oktiabria 1945 g.," in Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1995), p. 9. This phrase also appears in *Speak, Memory* (p. 176 [*SM/EL,* p. 135) in a form close to that of *Aerial Ways*, but still divergent from the Sikorskaia version: "Tell him that all I see in the prison yard are Brimstones and Cabbage Whites."

21. "V.V. Nabokov–E.V. Sikorskoi ot 25 oktiabria 1945 g.," in Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi,* p. 18.

22. There are other notable variant readings of the excerpt cited by Sikorskaia and of other pieces published later. Quoting his father's letter, Nabokov's biographers (Boyd and Boris Nosik), render the family's pet name for him as "Lody," which would presumably have been taken from the affectionate form of his given name, Volodia (as "Liusia," for instance, may be derived from Valiusia). But in her letter, Sikorskaia writes her brother's pet name as "Laudy," which sounds much the same as "Lody" but incorporates a play on the English word "laud" (praise). It is likely that the world-famous writer deemed it necessary to suppress evidence of parental pride by then half a century old.

23. "E.V. Sikorskaia–V.V. Nabokovu ot 29 sentiabria 1952 g,." in Nabokov, *Perepiska s sestroi,* p. 73.

24. To Edmund Wilson on February 18, 1957, in *The Nabokov–Wilson Letters: 1940–1971,* ed. Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), pp. 307–8; to Karl Proffer on July 21, 1972, in *Selected Letters,* p. 501; to Robert Dirig, in *Selected letters,* p. 549; to Alfred Appel Jr., in *Selected Letters,* p. 550; to both Dirig and Appel on April 23, 1975; and, finally, in a letter to the *New York Times Magazine,* published July 27, 1975, whose original is in *Selected Letters,* p. 547.

25. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin,* trans. Gennadii Aleksandrovich Barabtarlo with the collaboration of Véra Evseevna Nabokova (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2012), p. 184. [Quoted from *Pnin,* in Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels 1955–1962* (New York: Library of America, 1996), p. 384 (given below as "*P*" with the page number).—Trans.]

26. Nabokov, *Pnin,* p. 195 [*P,* p. 389].

27. Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 15.

28. Ibid., p. 107.

29. Nabokov, *Pnin,* p. 195 [*P,* p. 389].

30. Ibid., p. 202 [*P,* pp. 393–95]

31. Ibid., p. 206 [*P,* p. 395].

32. I must mention and thank Robert Taylor, the author of a tiny article ("Nabokov Exhibition at Harvard Shows Off His Other Passion: Butterflies") published in the

Boston Globe on January 29, 1988, and Joann Karges, who organized that exhibition and wrote the first monograph on this subject (*Nabokov's Lepidoptera: Genres and Genera* [Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985]). Had I not read that article and learned about the exhibition, this project would never have happened.

33. The route followed by the Vyra Swallowtail after breaking out of that airless cupboard repeats in detail that taken by Nabokov's great-great-uncle, the Decembrist Mikhail Aleksandrovich Nazimov, to exile in Siberia, first along the Yaroslavl Road, then to Viatka and Perm, and on to Yakutsk and Verkhne Kolymsk. In Verkhne Kolymsk, where the "cavalier" [*kavaler,* one of the butterfly's popular names in Russia—Trans.] "lost a spur," the convoy officer [*feldeger*] who was transporting the exile "was very nearly lost himself" (N.I. Lorer, *Zapiski dekabrista* [Irkutsk: Vostochno-Sibirskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 1984], p. 262). It is known that Nazimov, to whom Nabokov was proud to be related, had spoken frankly of his intention to visit America, "inasmuch as it [Nikita Muravev's constitution] is akin to the Constitution of the North American States, we should learn right there on the spot if everything really is as good as we see written, and for that it is necessary for one of the members [of the Secret Society of Decembrists—N.F.] to go there and study everything closely in all branches of government" (quoted from O.V. Popov's article in M.A. Nazimov, *Pisma, stati* [Irkutsk: Vostochno-Sibirskoe knizhnoe izdatelstvo, 1985], p. 14).

34. *Limenitis populi.* The epithet *krasavitsa* ["beauty"] is also a rendition of the English name "Poplar Admirable."

35. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita,* ed. preface, introduction, and notes, Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 390.

36. *Nabokov–Wilson Letters,* pp. 104–6.

37. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), p. 99.

38. *Nabokov–Wilson Letters,* pp. 182–84.

39. Vladimir Nabokov, "Slava," in Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniia,* p. 179. ["Fame," in *Collected Poems,* p. 109].

40. This subspecies of the Phoebus is mentioned by Nabokov in *Speak, Memory* (p. 52 [*SM/EL,* p. 36]). Here, "Captain (later, Vice-Admiral) Vasiliy Mihaylovich Golovnin" heads "an expedition to Nova Zembla" that may have included Nabokov's great-grandfather, "Nikolay Aleksandrovich Nabokov" (whose involvement is presently in doubt). During that expedition, the name "Nabokov's River" was added to the map of those islands. A bay in Alaska named in honor of V.M. Golovnin gave Dr. William Jacob Holland the idea for a suitable designation for this subspecies of the Apollo.

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Edward Armstrong, Dr. David Furth, and Professor A.W. Crompton for their help in arranging the butterfly exchange, and to Vassili Belov for his invaluable reflections on this subject over decades.—N.F.