Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism

Dana Dragunoiu

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To my family

Vladimir Nabokov, aged seven, with his father in 1906

Across the vacant lot in darkening dust
I glimpse a slender hound with snow-white coat.
Lost, I presume. But in the distance sounds
insistently and tenderly a whistling,
And in the twilight toward me a man
comes, calls. I recognize
your energetic stride. You haven't
changed much since you died.

—Vladimir Nabokov, "Evening on a Vacant Lot"
In memory of V. D. N.

Freedom of spirit! All the breath of humanity
lies in that conjunction of words.

—Vladimir Nabokov, postscript to the Russian
edition of *Lolita*

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I trust that my readers will never doubt that all faults and errors in the book are exclusively mine.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

This book follows a simplified version of the standard Library of Congress system for transliterating Russian. Exceptions include Nabokov's own transliterations of names (Chernyshevski, Fyodor, Tanya, Innokentiy, Sergey), familiar Russian names that have acquired fixed English spellings (Soloviev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Bely, Kerensky), and spellings canonized by others (Dmitri, Gennady). For the sake of simplicity I have dropped the Russian soft sign from all personal and place names (Gogol, Aikhenvald, Smolnyi). To provide the closest approximation to Russian pronunciation, I have opted for "Piotr" instead of "Petr," and "Semion" instead of "Semen." Whenever a Russian given name has a common English counterpart, I have used the English equivalent ("George" instead of "Georgii," "Michael" instead of "Mikhail"). However, bibliographic references preserve a simplified version of the Library of Congress transliteration to aid those readers who wish to consult these sources. Stand-alone Russian terms are given in the nominative, not in declension. Quoted materials translated by others remain unaltered; all other translations are mine.

Abbreviations

A	Vladimir V. Nabokov, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), in *Novels 1969–1974,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1–485.
BP	Sergey N. Bulgakov, "Basic Problems of the Theory of Progress," in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Randall Poole, foreword by Caryl Emerson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 85–123.
BRR	Judith Elin Zimmerman, "Between Revolution and Reaction: The Russian Constitutional Democratic Party, October, 1905 to June, 1907" (Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1967).
BS	Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (1947), in *Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 161–358.
CPR	Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in *Practical Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 133–271.
CR	Gleb Struve, "The Cultural Renaissance," in *Russia Under the Last Tsar,* ed. Theofanis George Stavrou (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), 179–201.
DBDV	Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971,* revised and expanded edition, ed. Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
Def	Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense* (1930), trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Vintage, 1990).
DRT	Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

EI	Randall A. Poole, "Editor's Introduction: Philosophy and Politics in the Russian Liberation Movement," in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Randall Poole, foreword by Caryl Emerson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 1–83.
EIPL	Pavel Novgorodtsev, "Ethical Idealism in the Philosophy of Law [On the Question of the Revival of Natural Law]," in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Randall Poole, foreword by Caryl Emerson (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 274–324.
FB	Vladimir Nabokov, "Father's Butterflies: Second Addendum to *The Gift,*" trans. Dmitri Nabokov, in *Nabokov's Butterflies: Unpublished and Uncollected Writings,* ed. Brian Boyd and Robert Michael Pyle (Boston: Beacon, 2000), 198–234.
FPP	Terence Emmons, *The Formation of Political Parties and the First National Elections in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).
Gi	Iosif Hessen [Gessen], *Gody izgnaniia: Zhiznennyi otchet* [*The Years of Exile: An Autobiographical Account*] (Paris: YMCA, 1979).
Gift	Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (1963), trans. Michael Scammell with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage, 1991).
Gl	Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory,* trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).
GMM	Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), in *Practical Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 37–108.
I	Richard Pipes, introduction to *The Provisional Government,* by V. D. Nabokov, ed. Andrew Field (St. Lucia, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1970), ix–xiv.
IB	Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959), trans. Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage International, 1989).
L	Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955), in *Novels 1955–1962,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 1–298.
LE	Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics,* trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1963).

LL Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature,* ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego, Calif.: Harvest, Harcourt, Bruccoli Clark, 1980).

LPRL Andrzej Walicki, *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

LRR William G. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution: The Constitutional Democratic Party, 1917–1921* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974).

MD Michael Wood, *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Pimlico, 1994).

MEC Vladimir I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* (Moscow: Progress, 1973).

MM Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), in *Practical Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 363–603.

NA Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's "Ada": The Place of Consciousness* (Christchurch, N.Z.: Cybereditions, 2001).

NB Kurt Johnson and Steve Coates, *Nabokov's Blues: The Scientific Odyssey of a Literary Genius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Zoland Books, 1999).

NP Raymond Pearson, "Nashe Pravitel'stvo? The Crimean Regional Government of 1918–19," *Revolutionary Russia* 2, no. 2 (1989): 14–30.

NpKv Maksim Vinaver, *Nashe pravitel'stvo (Krymskiia vospominaniia 1918–1919 g.g.)* [*Our Government (Crimean Reminiscences 1918–1919)*] (Paris: Imprimerie d'Art Voltaire, 1928).

OB Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita,*" in *Novels 1955–1962,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 293–98.

Onm Vladimir Vernadskii, "O nauchnom mirovozzrenii" ["On the Scientific Worldview"], *Voprosy filosofii i psikhologii* 65 (1902): 1409–65.

P Galya Diment, *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1997).

PF Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962), in *Novels 1955–1962,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 437–667.

PG	V. D. Nabokov, *The Provisional Government,* in *V. D. Nabokov and the Russian Provisional Government, 1917,* ed. and trans. Virgil D. Medlin and Steven L. Parsons (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1976).
PHK	George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge: The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne,* ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop (London: Thomas Nelson, 1948).
Pnin	Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (1957), in *Novels 1955–1962,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 299–435.
Pp	V. D. Nabokov, "Plotskie prestupleniia po proektu ugolovnago ulozheniia" ["Carnal Crimes According to the Criminal Code Project"], *Vestnik Prava* [*The Law Bulletin*] 32, nos. 9–10 (1902): 129–89.
QS	Stephen H. Blackwell, *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009).
Rg	Daniil S. Pasmanik, *Revoliutsionnye gody v Krymu* [*The Revolutionary Years in the Crimea*]. Paris: Imprimerie de Navarre, 1926.
RL	George Fischer, *Russian Liberalism, from Gentry to Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958).
RLC	Frances Nethercott, *Russian Legal Culture Before and After Communism: Criminal Justice, Politics, and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 2007).
RRRI	Christopher Read, *Religion, Revolution and the Russian Intelligentsia, 1900–1912: The Vekhi Debate and Its Intellectual Background* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
SL	Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters, 1940–1977,* ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1989).
SLL	Richard Pipes, *Struve, Liberal on the Left, 1870–1905* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).
SLR	Richard Pipes, *Struve, Liberal on the Right, 1905–1944* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980).
SM	Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1967), in *Novels and Memoirs 1941–1951,* ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 359–635.

Sm	V. D. Nabokov, "Soderzhanie i metod nauki ugolovnago prava" ["The Science of Criminal Law: Contents and Method"], in *Sbornik statei po ugolovnomu pravu* [*A Collection of Articles on Criminal Law*] (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia Tovarishchestva "Obshchestvennaia Pol'za," 1904), 1–23.
SO	Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974).
Td	V. D. Nabokov, *Tiuremnye dosugi* [*Prison Reflections*], *Pravo* 34 (August 24, 1908): 1812–21; 35 (September 2, 1908): 1867–78; 36 (September 7, 1908): 1914–27; 38 (September 21, 1908): 2012–20.
TT	Michael Karpovich, "Two Types of Russian Liberalism: Maklakov and Miliukov," in *Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought,* ed. Ernest J. Simmons (New York: Russell & Russell, 1967), 129–43.
Vdv	Iosif Hessen [Gessen], *V dvukh vekakh: Zhiznennyi otchet* [*Two Centuries: An Autobiographical Account*] (Berlin: Speer & Schmidt, 1937).
VNAY	Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991).
VNRY	Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990).
ZP	Stephen H. Blackwell, *Zina's Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov's "Gift"* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000).

Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism

Speak, Father

> From the very start, History seems to have been anxious of depriving [my father] of a full opportunity to reveal his great gifts of statesmanship in a Russian republic of the Western type.
> —Vladimir Nabokov
>
> The history of Russian liberalism has been sadly neglected.
> —Michael Karpovich

IN 1920, DURING HIS FIRST YEAR as an undergraduate at Cambridge University, twenty-one-year-old Vladimir Nabokov participated in a debate hosted by Trinity College's Magpie and Stump Debating Society. His argument in favor of Allied intervention in Russia was an act of ventriloquism that saw him presenting as his own words a lecture that his father had written and delivered under the title "Soviet Rule and Russia's Future" a few months earlier at King's College, London.[1] Returning to the scene of that debate years later in his autobiography, Nabokov viewed the event as a minor disaster: "the (victorious) apologist was a man from *The Manchester Guardian;* I forget his name, but recall drying up utterly after reciting what I had memorized, and that was my first and last political speech."[2]

Forced into exile by revolution and civil war, the young, aristocratic Nabokov lifts from his father an argument that was dear to both of them. And yet, as he looks back on the event through the frame of his memoir, he is eager to cast the debating fiasco as a last look down a road not taken. He dismisses the speech as an anomaly, a youthful indiscretion on the part of a man more comfortable celebrating his "supreme indifference" to sociopolitical concerns.[3]

Nabokov's characteristic reluctance to engage in political advocacy and debate is striking not only because his own life had been so calamitously affected by political events, but also because two of his novels are fundamen-

tally committed to portraying the brutality of unrestrained political power. *Invitation to a Beheading* (*Priglashenie na kazn',* 1938) and *Bend Sinister* (1947) depict versions of the regimes that forced Nabokov to flee Russia, then Germany, then France. Unrestrained political power claimed the life of his brother Sergey, who perished in a Nazi concentration camp; vicious political partisanship led directly to the death of his father, who died trying to disarm a right-wing assassin bent on shooting a longtime friend and political colleague.

Nabokov's act of ventriloquism, his unequivocal assertion of intellectual kinship between father and son, would never again be so embarrassingly and transparently staged before the public. But the kinship itself was no illusion. His father's political and ideological commitments play a decisive role in organizing the concerns of Nabokov's overtly political novels. They also shape the novels where Nabokov appears to be working in his most aesthetically self-indulgent mode: *Glory* (*Podvig,* 1932), *The Gift* (*Dar,* 1952), *Lolita* (1955), *Pale Fire* (1962), and *Ada* (1969).

Nabokov frequently complained that pre-revolutionary and émigré Russian history was largely unknown to Western historians and intellectuals.[4] His family's frustration with this profound misunderstanding of Russian history asserted itself as soon as the Nabokovs arrived in England after their escape from Russia. Nabokov documents, for example, his family's dismay at H. G. Wells's enthusiastic support of the October Revolution. An acquaintance of his father and a former guest of the Nabokovs in their St. Petersburg home, Wells "proved impossible to convince that Bolshevism was but an especially brutal and thorough form of barbaric oppression—in itself as old as the desert sands—and not at all the attractively new revolutionary experiment that so many foreign observers took it to be" (*SM* 579).[5]

At Trinity College, the scene of his debating fiasco, Nabokov frequently argued about politics, especially with one "Nesbit," a pseudonym for a Cambridge acquaintance whose naïveté about Lenin's regime proved invulnerable to strenuous counter-argument (*SM* 583–85; see also *VNRY* 168). Decades later in the United States, the *New Yorker*'s renowned editor Katharine White caused offense when she asked Nabokov to make changes to an autobiographical story he had submitted to the magazine. Urging him to tone down what she regarded as a biased denunciation of Lenin's suppression of civil liberties, White received a withering response from Nabokov: "I am terribly sorry, but what you suggest is quite impossible. It is really not my fault that Americans know so little about former Russia."[6] The story would later become a chapter in *Speak, Memory,* the British title of its American predecessor, *Conclusive Evidence* (1951).

Nabokov's most extended battles on this front were waged in his correspondence with Edmund Wilson. He deplored Wilson's Marxist-Leninist

sympathies, arguing that they rested primarily on myths fostered by Soviet propaganda. In a letter from 1949, Nabokov was moved to refute Wilson's badly informed contention that no important Russian poetry had been written during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Given his tendency to insist on the uniqueness of his own genius, Nabokov's retort assumed a surprising form: "The 'decline' of Russian literature in 1905–1917 is a Soviet invention. Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days. And never was poetry so popular—not even in Pushkin's days. I am a product of that period, I was bred in that atmosphere."[7]

NABOKOV AND THE RUSSIAN SILVER AGE

This book studies Nabokov's Russian and English novels against the backdrop of that "period" and its "atmosphere." It does so, first, by establishing Nabokov's profound debt to the discourses and preoccupations of prerevolutionary Russian liberalism, especially as they were articulated by his father and other intellectuals of his father's immediate acquaintance and milieu. Second, it establishes how these Russian contexts shape the terms in which Nabokov's art responds to political issues and crises pressed upon him during his years in emigration and in America, and then again during his final years on the banks of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. This project may seem counterintuitive given that Nabokov is certainly better known for heaping scorn on political art than for the sophistication of his engagement with political and ideological concerns in his fiction. But his art is in many crucial respects shaped by thoughtful explorations of political and ideological questions, and this book's chief goal is to accomplish something that Nabokov himself seems to have despaired of ever accomplishing on his own—namely, granting his English-speaking readers some sort of intellectual purchase on the extraordinary richness, and tragically unfulfilled promise, of the cultural and political traditions that Soviet rule had managed, as it were, to strike from the record.

In interviews, letters, and prefaces Nabokov could frequently give the impression that he regarded art as a domain into which history ought not to intrude, but a close attunement to historical particularities structured the goals he established for himself when translating and annotating the poem he considered the crowning achievement of Russian poetry, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin.* In his essay "Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English," Nabokov warns that

> one of the main troubles with would-be translators is their ignorance. Only by sheer unacquaintance with Russian life in the 'twenties of the last century

> can one explain, for instance, their persistently translating *derevnya* by "village" instead of "countryseat," and *skakat'* by "to gallop" instead of "to drive." Anyone who wishes to attempt a translation of *Onegin* should acquire exact information in regard to a number of relevant subjects, such as the Fables of Krïlov, Byron's works, French poets of the eighteenth century, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse,* Pushkin's biography, banking games, Russian songs related to divination, Russian military ranks of the time as compared to western European and American ones, the difference between cranberry and lingenberry, the rules of the English pistol duel as used in Russia, and the Russian language.[8]

My own forays into Russian intellectual and political history aim to uncover what Nabokov refers to in the same essay as "not only the essential pattern of the text but also the borrowings with which that pattern is interwoven." Nabokov ends his essay on translation by calling for "such sense and such notes for all the poetry in other tongues."[9] The following chapters contend that the precise political and ideological stakes of Nabokov's thinking on matters ranging from art to Darwin, from law to metaphysics, remain locked in the foreign tongue of pre- and post-revolutionary Russian liberalism.

Nabokov argued time and again that the West's lack of familiarity with this tradition was a powerful obstacle to a full understanding of the betrayals and miseries of Bolshevism. This book argues, in turn, that the failure to gauge adequately Nabokov's manifold debt to the discourses of pre- and post-revolutionary Russian liberalism has obscured the complex political and ideological dimensions of his art. Like the protagonist of *The Gift,* who inspects the past for signs of the "fatal flaw" that has made Russia "so crabbed and gray," "so befooled and befuddled,"[10] Nabokov repeatedly looked back into Russia's political and intellectual history in an effort to understand the failure of his homeland's liberal experiment and his own position as an inheritor of that stillborn legacy. This book charts Nabokov's investments in that experiment, and studies his art in relation to the intellectual and activist contexts that sustained it.

Vital work has been done on Russian liberal thought since Nabokov's death, and the field of principles and preoccupations that convene under that name can no longer be said to be as uncharted as they seemed to Nabokov. Intellectual and legal historians such as Frances Nethercott, Richard Pipes, Randall Poole, Christopher Read, and Andrzej Walicki have mapped the period's debates and key figures in ways that illuminate Nabokov's position as their thoughtful inheritor. But in spite of Nabokov's best efforts to assert his intellectual and artistic debts to these men and their commitments, literary scholars have yet to read his work in relation to the political and ideological controversies that preceded and followed the up-

heavals of the Silver Age. This book aims both to rectify that omission and to reframe the predominantly Americanist terms in which Nabokov's politics have been examined. When Nabokov views, for example, the events of the McCarthyist period, he does so by channeling his glance back through early twentieth-century Russian debates about the nature of law and the legitimate boundaries of political power. In addition to these goals, this book argues that Nabokov understands his own politics as an inheritance from his father, and that the political instincts that supply his novels with their particular form and texture cast matters of ethics, justice, and art as meditations upon the life, work, defeats, and death of his father.

V. D. (Vladimir Dmitrievich) Nabokov (1870–1922), the man whose words Nabokov memorized and delivered in the debate at Trinity College, was one of the most eminent leaders of the liberal opposition against tsarist autocracy in pre-Soviet times.[11] He might have been expected to follow a radically different career trajectory. His father, Dmitri Nikolaevich Nabokov (1826–1904), served as minister of justice under Alexander II and Alexander III, and the family had been long distinguished for military and civil service to the state (*VNRY* 20–21).[12] V. D. Nabokov studied law at the University of St. Petersburg, taught criminal law at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence, and became one of the most highly respected criminalists of his time. In the face of strenuous family opposition, he renounced a career in court circles for the sake of joining the struggle against tsarist autocracy. A leading member of the Constitutional Democratic (Kadet) Party,[13] he served on its Central Committee and was a member of the State Duma, Russia's first elected national legislative assembly. For two months during the short interim between the 1917 February Revolution and Lenin's seizure of power on October 25 of the same year, V. D. Nabokov occupied the important post of head of the Chancellery of the Provisional Government. The Bolshevik coup drove the family first to the Crimea and then to western Europe; Nabokov's father continued his political work in Berlin, at that time the largest center of Russia's émigré community.

Though a born aristocrat, V. D. Nabokov's political principles and activities aligned him with Russia's "intelligentsia," a small but very significant body of educated men and women who opposed Russia's tsarist autocracy and social inequality. Christopher Read identifies four essential criteria that characterized this segment of Russia's population: a profound concern for the social question and a sense of identification with Russia's poor and oppressed; a critical and often hostile attitude toward the government, which it viewed as unjust and indefensible; a reflective turn of mind capable of articulating this hostility; and a self-ascribed responsibility to give voice to the needs of the downtrodden.[14] As Nabokov explained to Wilson in a letter from 1948, the main features of Russia's intelligentsia included "the spirit of

self-sacrifice, intense participation in political causes or political thought, intense sympathy for the underdog of any nationality, fanatical integrity, tragic inability to sink to compromise, true spirit of international responsibility."[15] In *Speak, Memory,* he notes that the Russian word *intelligenty* "had more socially idealistic and less highbrow connotations than 'intellectuals' as used in America" (*SM* 595).

The period of V. D. Nabokov's most energetic political activism as one of Russia's prominent *intelligenty* was also the period in which, as his son put it in his letter to Wilson, "Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff." It is commonly known as the Russian Silver Age, but Nabokov's friend, the literary scholar Gleb Struve (also the son of a prominent Kadet), preferred to call it the Russian Cultural Renaissance. In his account of this first decade and a half of the twentieth century, Struve notes that the period saw exciting developments in "all the areas of cultural and spiritual life—arts, letters, philosophy, religious, social, and political thought."[16] Marked by a broad revolt against the traditional values of the radical intelligentsia as they had crystallized in the 1860s and 1870s, Russia's Cultural Renaissance rejected the view of leading nineteenth-century nihilists such as Nikolai Chernyshevski and Dmitri Pisarev that positivism, materialism, and utilitarianism were the natural allies of progressive thought and social reform. The representatives of Russia's Cultural Renaissance challenged these theoretical outlooks under the banner of individualism, aestheticism, and religious and philosophical idealism (CR 183).

Struve is eager to point out that this cultural renascence was not an exclusively artistic phenomenon; he emphasizes that "great and heated controversies" in the sociopolitical sphere played a leading role in the period's artistic excitement and experimentation. He also depicts the period as one in which some of Russia's most prominent intellectuals moved from positivism to idealism (CR 183–85). The leader of these former "legal Marxists" who famously remade themselves into Kantian neo-idealists was Struve's own father Peter (Piotr) Struve (1870–1944), a public intellectual and political activist whom some consider "the most luminous intellect of his generation in Russia."[17] Other famous converts from Marxism to idealism included Nicholas (Nikolai) Berdiaev (1874–1948), Sergey Bulgakov (1871–1944), and Simon (Semion) Frank (1877–1950). Together with Peter Struve, these men would play a critical role in two landmark documents of the Russian Silver Age: *Problemy idealizma* (*Problems of Idealism,* 1902) and its sequel *Vekhi* (*Landmarks* or *Signposts,* 1909).

Gleb Struve's insistence that the anti-positivist and anti-materialist impulse of the Russian Silver Age energized both the artistic and political domains is also stressed by Christopher Read. Although Read admits that

the differences between Russia's symbolist artists and the idealist thinkers who contributed to *Problems of Idealism* were substantial, he also notes that these groups were united in their commitment to philosophical idealism and political individualism (*RRRI* 13–14). He observes:

> All were resolutely opposed to the dominant positivist, scientific and materialist world outlook of the intelligentsia and what their collective achievement showed beyond all doubt was that this positivist outlook was undergoing perhaps the most severe attack it had faced in Russia. The result of the activities of these people was the creation of a thorough-going, non-positivist body of thought, not confined to aristocratic or academic circles but stretching down into all sections of educated Russian society and including many of the country's major creative talents. (*RRRI* 38)

Read also challenges the "mistaken belief that the symbolists were apart from, or above, politics and lived in a separate world devoted to art for art's sake." Though this may have been true in the 1890s, Russia's first revolutionary period "penetrated deeply into the formerly aloof creative intelligentsia and they, to a greater or lesser degree, were affected by the politicisation and polarisation brought about by the events of 1905" (*RRRI* 121).

The idealist revolt against positivism in the artistic domain manifested itself most conspicuously in its rejection of Chernyshevski's and Pisarev's epistemological realism (the view that reality is independent of perception) and their subordination of art to social utility (CR 185, 187–88). Whereas symbolists such as Valerii Briusov and Konstantin Balmont preoccupied themselves with "formal, technical, prosodic innovations," the younger symbolists mentioned by Nabokov in his letter to Wilson—Blok and Bely—were centrally concerned with religion and metaphysics (CR 190–91). Struve notes further that the richness and vitality of the period's poetry were celebrated in a variety of uniquely Russian "fat," or "thick," monthly reviews—*tolstye zhurnaly.* Struve's observation that art and politics commingled in these monthlies reveals an important aspect of the ideological context in which Nabokov developed as an artist.

Each of these journals, Struve explains further, had a well-defined political orientation, even if that political orientation frequently provided a surprising fit with the aesthetic tastes of their editors. His father's liberal (and after 1910, liberal-conservative) monthly, *Russkaia mysl'* (*Russian Thought*), consistently published the most innovative poets of the period, whereas the orthodox liberal *Vestnik Evropy* (*The Herald of Europe*) and the Populist *Russkoe bogatstvo* (*The Russian Wealth*) were both "stodgily conservative in artistic matters" (CR 197–98). As Nabokov's biographer, Brian Boyd, notes,

Nabokov's first major poetic breakthroughs came at sixteen and eighteen years of age when *Vestnik Evropy* and *Russkaia mysl'* each accepted one of his poems for publication (*VNRY* 118, 129).

Read has noted further that even the journals of the period devoted to artistic matters showed a lively preoccupation with the intellectual and political discussions of the day. *Vesy* (*The Scales*), for instance, published reviews of *Problems of Idealism* and *Vekhi*, and *Zolotoe runo* (*The Golden Fleece*) proclaimed its support of the liberation movement in its opening manifesto (*RRRI* 33–35). Read concludes: "Far from showing lack of interest in social and philosophical questions on the part of the symbolists, the journals indicate that the full meaning of their movement can only be comprehended when considered in relation to the intellectual environment" (*RRRI* 34).

Echoing Nabokov's words to Wilson, Gleb Struve bemoans the fact that this rich and varied cultural efflorescence has been either studiously distorted or wiped out from the annals of Russian history by Soviet officials (CR 200). And like Nabokov, too, Struve had a uniquely personal stake in this particular period of Russian history. When the Harvard historian Richard Pipes set out to write what was to become the influential, two-volume biography of his father, Struve energetically supported the project.[18] The biography was the most notable achievement in Pipes's wider effort to memorialize the forgotten voices of pre-revolutionary Russian liberalism. He also contributed, for example, to the English-language publication of V. D. Nabokov's political memoir *The Provisional Government* (*Vremennoe pravitel'stvo*). This project delighted Nabokov, who saw in it a welcome exception to Western ignorance of Russia's liberal traditions. After reading Pipes's introduction to his father's memoir, Nabokov expressed his pleasure and gratitude in a letter sent from his home in Montreux, Switzerland, on May 11, 1971: "I wish to tell you how infinitely gratifying it is to me to find in it this particular approach to Russian history at the revolutionary period. Few, indeed, are the foreign scholars who understand so penetratingly the terrible betrayal of the cause of liberty in the deepest sense of the word engendered on principle by the *earliest* Bolshevists."[19]

RUSSIAN LIBERALISM AND *LICHNOST'*

The "cause of liberty," resurrected in Pipes's introduction to *The Provisional Government* and invoked in such plangent tones in Nabokov's letter, was the central animating principle of the Russian liberal tradition to which V. D. Nabokov had dedicated his life. It was grounded in a foundational liberal respect for *lichnost'*, a Russian term that can mean personality, person, in-

dividual, individuality, or selfhood. For V. D. Nabokov and some of his closest liberal allies, the term was used to designate the individual as a bearer of absolute value, dignity, and autonomy. This conception of personhood found its political expression in a commitment to constitutionalism, civil liberties, and a rule of law. Theoretically, it drew its sustenance from a broad philosophical tradition that encompassed ethics, legal theory, philosophy of science, epistemology, and metaphysics.

A passionate commitment to this particular conception of *lichnost'* constitutes Nabokov's greatest debt to his father and his father's political associates. Respect for the inviolable uniqueness and autonomy of the individual subject rests at the core of Nabokov's intellectual and artistic universe. It fueled his fierce opposition to all schools of thought that undermined human agency and refused to acknowledge personhood as a self-determining end: positivism, materialism, scientism, and utilitarianism (whether inspired by Darwin, Marx, or Freud). As the following chapters set out to show, Nabokov's efforts to refute these schools of thought borrowed key arguments from his father and some of his father's closest friends and political associates, but he also reflected critically upon these arguments, modulating, complicating, and sometimes altering them in his own way. Like many of his émigré friends, men whose fathers had also played central roles in the history of Russian liberalism, Nabokov understood himself partly through the lens of his genealogical attachment to a great generation of Russian liberal thinkers and activists. This view helps account for the urgent, personal dimension of the political and ideological inquiries that run through his art.

Pipes's introduction to V. D. Nabokov's *The Provisional Government* reaffirms this link when he stitches the history of Russia's liberation movement into the fabric of the Nabokovs' family life, casting great political developments as domestic affairs. Pipes singles out for attention the great national zemstvo congress held in St. Petersburg between November 6 and 19, 1904; it had been authorized by the minister of the interior on the condition that it take place in private homes.[20] Calling it "the most important public assembly held in imperial Russia up to that time," Pipes observes that the congress stirred high hopes across the nation:

> The country's population instinctively sensed its historic significance. Delegates departing for the congress were accompanied to railway stations by crowds of well-wishers. On their arrival in St. Petersburg they found that even though the meetings were held in private residences that had not been publicly advertised and shifted their locale from day to day, the cab drivers unerringly knew where to take them; and if they did not, friendly policemen in uniform or plain clothes offered them directions. Each day, a flood of congratulatory telegrams poured in. Addressed simply "Zemstvo Congress,

> St. Petersburg," they were delivered by the postal authorities to the correct destination. These telegrams exhorted the delegates to speak on behalf of the entire nation, not just the zemstva, and openly to advocate a constitution.[21]

The final sessions of the congress took place in V. D. Nabokov's home at 47 Bol'shaia Morskaia. It was here, presumably in the Nabokovs' large music room on the second floor, that the deputies "formally affixed their signatures to a document calling for the establishment in Russia of a constitutional regime with a parliament granted genuine legislative rights." "When the ceremony was completed," Pipes reports, "one of the deputies exclaimed that future generations would commemorate the great event to which they had been witness by a plaque at the entrance to Nabokov's house."[22]

The dreams engendered by these events were shattered thirteen years later when Russia fell into the hands of a party that scorned civil rights and the rule of law, and the Nabokovs, like most Russian liberals, sought refuge in the West. Although a plaque does now adorn the house at 47 Bol'shaia Morskaia, it makes no mention of the auspicious historical events described by Pipes. Instead, the plaque announces the Vladimir Nabokov Museum, an institution that celebrates the achievements of one of the twentieth century's most beloved writers of fiction. Nabokov's self-declared indifference to sociopolitical matters may sit oddly with his family home's historical pedigree, but this is not an insoluble paradox. As the following chapters attempt to show, Nabokov disavowed an interest in sociopolitical matters precisely because he was so profoundly committed to the liberal principles he inherited from his father. The plaque at 47 Bol'shaia Morskaia is mute on the subject of V. D. Nabokov's political career, but his son's Russian and English novels reverberate with concerns that were vital to the discourses of pre- and post-revolutionary Russian liberalism, and with thought experiments of the kind that pay tribute to the brave and optimistic political activists who had once milled in the family's music room.

FATHERS AND UNCLES

An episode in *Pnin* (1957) provides a potent case study of the novelist's ineliminable connection to these men. This short novel, wedged in between *Lolita* and *Pale Fire,* is Nabokov's most explicit fictional tribute to Russia's liberal tradition. It seems also to hint that he recognized that his own interests and commitments could seem unintelligible or even ludicrous to observers unfamiliar with the discourses and contexts of Russian liberalism. It certainly shows that he viewed those discourses and contexts as provid-

ing a safe harbor in which a specific kind of Russian could blossom into his best self.

Pnin's clownish mannerisms, unruly English, and general clumsiness make him a figure of fun in his role as professor at Waindell University. Even his most sympathetic American friends admit that his "mispronunciations are mythopeic" and that his "slips of the tongue are oracular."[23] Soviet émigrés are less generous. Pnin's young compatriot Oleg Komarov—"for whom an ideal Russia consisted of the Red Army, an anointed monarch, collective farms, anthroposophy, the Russian Church and the Hydro-Electric Dam"—contemptuously dismisses Pnin for his "*antikvarnïy liberalizm* [antiquarian liberalism]" (*Pnin* 347–48).

At The Pines, however, the country house of a Russian friend who plays host "every even-year summer" to a group of "liberals and intellectuals who had left Russia around 1920" (*Pnin* 381), Pnin undergoes a radical transformation. Among these "firm-principled exiles," conversation is conducted in a coded tongue incomprehensible to the uninitiated: with "a few rapid passwords—allusions, intonations impossible to render in a foreign language," they traverse "the course of recent Russian history, thirty-five years of hopeless injustice following a century of struggling justice and glimmering hope" (*Pnin* 387). Finally restored to his natural habitus, Pnin encounters perfect sympathy and understanding, and is endowed with a charm and grace that his Waindell colleagues fail to notice. Among these like-minded compatriots, a simple game of croquet occasions a metamorphosis in Pnin:

> As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, the man was transfigured. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback. It seemed to be always his turn to play. . . . Pnin foreshadowed every stroke with nimble aim-taking oscillations of the mallet head, then gave the ball an accurate tap, and forthwith, still hunched, and with the ball still rolling, walked rapidly to the spot where he had planned for it to stop. With geometrical gusto, he ran it through hoops, evoking cries of admiration from the onlookers. (*Pnin* 391)

This charmed space grants Pnin a startling elegance, but the space and its "few rapid passwords" remain inaccessible, even incomprehensible, to his American colleagues. In the version of events communicated to the novel's narrator by Jack Cockerell, Waindell's most dedicated Pnin impersonator, this idyllic refuge for old Russian émigrés is contemptuously dismissed as "the chicken farm of some Privy Counselor of the Tsar" (*Pnin* 433).

Pnin rediscovers his voice and dignity in the midst of a community that is at once little known in the West and scorned by younger Russian

colleagues such as Komarov. As Nabokov reminded his friends and readers, this important segment of the Russian emigration—a segment to which both he and his father belonged—had been erased from the annals of history by the distortions of Soviet propaganda and by the English-speaking world's general ignorance of Russia's pre-revolutionary past. In a letter to the editor of the London *Sunday Times* published on January 1, 1967, Nabokov insisted that Russia's

> liberal intelligentsia . . . was the backbone and marrow of émigré culture, a fact deliberately played down by Soviet historians; and no wonder: it was that liberal cultural core, and certainly not the crude and ambiguous activities of extreme rightists, that formed a genuine anti-Bolshevist opposition (still working today), and it was people like my father who pronounced the first and final verdict on the Soviet police state. (*SO* 214–15)

Pnin pays homage to this uprooted and forgotten community of Russian exiles whose legacy is as critical for understanding Nabokov as it is for appreciating Pnin. Nabokov's repeated claims that he was indifferent to political matters have made it seem difficult or unprofitable to reconstruct the ideologies and convictions that defined the community in which he was most at home. The failure to do so, however, has obscured the well-defined and deeply felt political project at the heart of Nabokov's poetics. Like Pnin, Nabokov finds his truest voice among these misunderstood and neglected "elderly Russians," these "fathers or uncles" (*Pnin* 381), who provide Pnin with a temporary home and a shared history in the midst of a life shaped by loneliness and exile.

The goal of this book is to reconstruct, parse, and interpret the "few rapid passwords—allusions, intonations" that connect Nabokov's world to the discourses of Russian liberalism. If Pnin's life is a loving recovery of the cultural heritage which Nabokov claimed as his own, his unusual name and his "*antikvarnïy liberalizm*" describe the uniquely personal bond that tied Nabokov to this forgotten community. Scholars concur that the most important single model for Pnin is Marc Szeftel, a Russian historian and Nabokov's colleague at Cornell University. As Nabokov's representative of Russian liberalism in exile, it is appropriate that Szeftel was the author of an influential essay describing the status of "personal-inviolability" rights in Russia after Alexander II's 1864 judiciary reforms.

In *Pniniad: Vladimir Nabokov and Marc Szeftel,* Galya Diment shows that Nabokov also endowed Pnin with extensive material culled from his own personal biography.[24] This leads her to assert that "it is quite obvious that the character and his maker had important traits and tastes in common" (*P* 48). Writing himself into Pnin enables Nabokov to lay claim to his