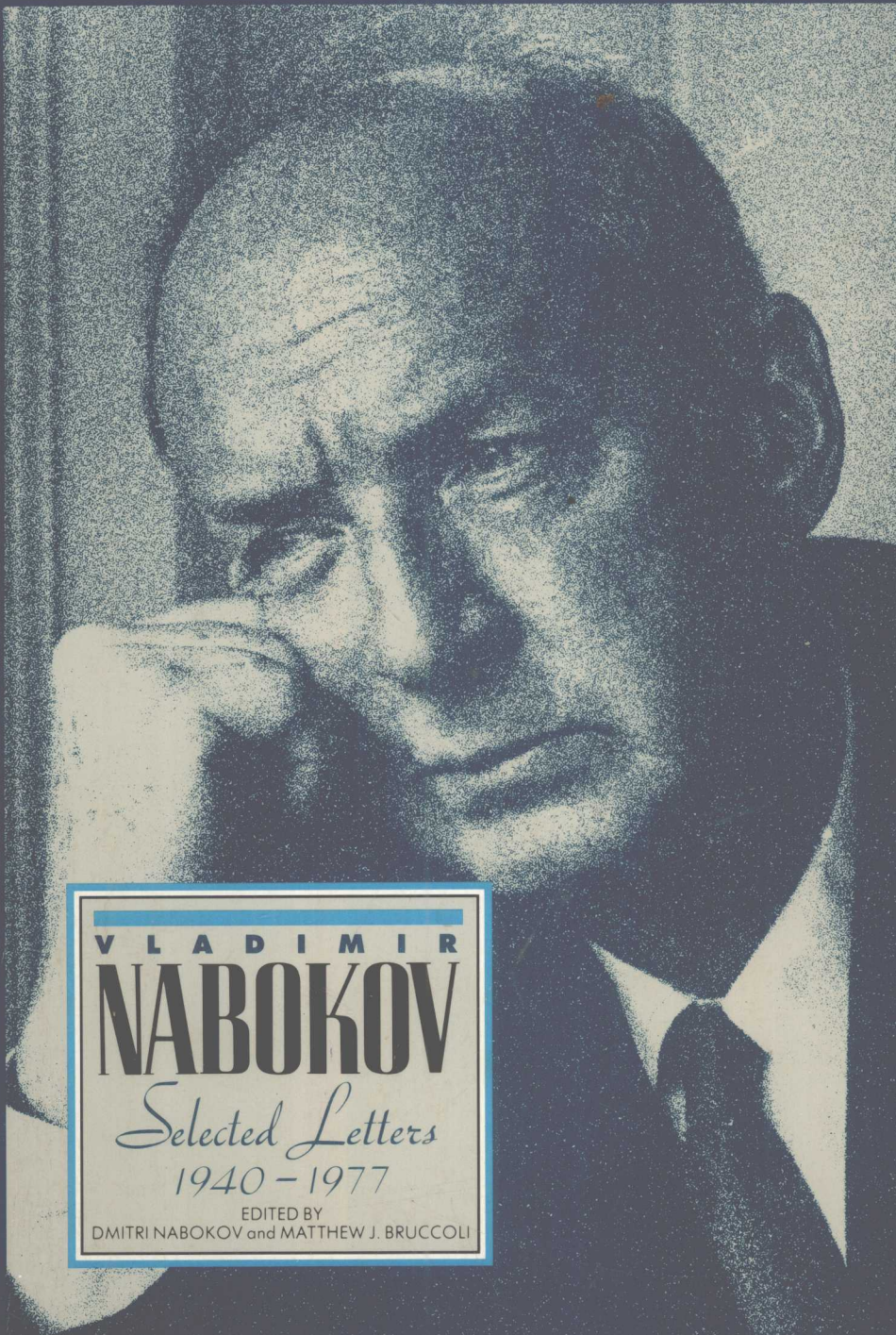


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V L A D I M I R

**NABOKOV**

*Selected Letters*

1940-1977

EDITED BY

DMITRI NABOKOV and MATTHEW J. BRUCCOLI

A HARVEST/HBJ BOOK

Vladimir Nabokov



罗伯罗科夫信件选

VLADIMIR  
NABOKOV

SELECTED LETTERS

1940-1977

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*Edited by Dmitri Nabokov  
and Matthew J. Bruccoli*

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FRONTISPIECE: Véra and Vladimir Nabokov, Montreux 1968  
(photo by Philippe Halsman, 1968; © Yvonne Halsman 1989)



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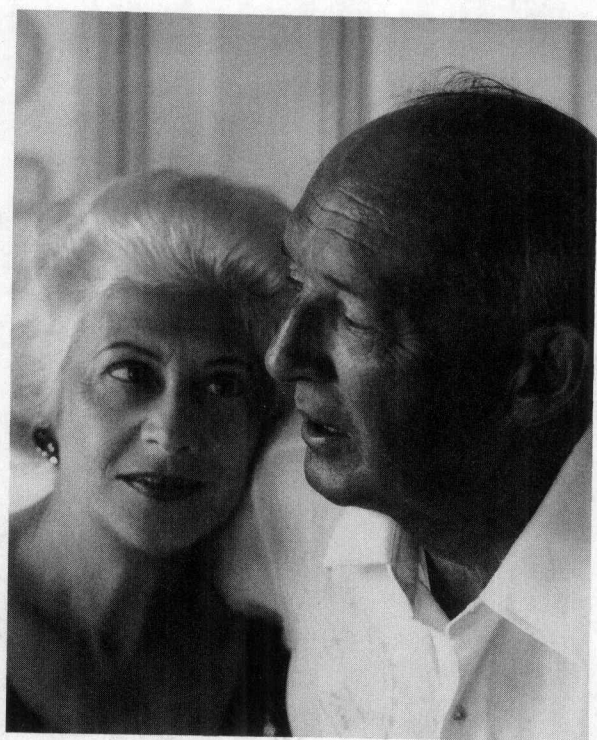
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VLADIMIR  
NABOKOV



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## INTRODUCTION

Dmitri Nabokov

I have always had a number of parts lined up in case the muse failed. A lepidopterist exploring fabulous jungles came first. Then there was the chess grand master, then the tennis ace with an unreturnable service, then the goalie saving a historical shot, and finally, finally, the author of a pile of unknown writings—*Pale Fire*, *Lolita*, *Ada*—that my heirs discover and publish.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV, 1977 BBC interview

... turning to the title-page butterfly, its head is that of a small tortoise, and its pattern that of a common Cabbage White butterfly (whereas the insect in my poem is clearly described as belonging to a group of small blue butterflies with dotted undersides), which is as meaningless... as would be a picture of a tuna fish on the jacket of *Moby Dick*. I want to be quite clear and frank: I have nothing against stylization, but I do object to stylized ignorance.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV, 1959 letter to publisher

I do have a story for you—but it is still in my head; quite complete, however; ready to emerge; the pattern showing through the wingcases of the pupa.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV, 1946 letter to Katharine A. White

To give credits where credits are due, I express my gratitude to friends and scholars for providing missing letters; to William Jovanovich and Julian Muller of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich for their patience during what was a long and sometimes fitful gestation; and,

above all, to Matthew Bruccoli, not only for his valuable collaboration, but also for his gentle encouragement and outward calm as deadlines passed like telegraph poles glimpsed from a speeding train.

Procrastination, however, can bear unexpected fruit. Thus, the appearance of this volume coincides felicitously with a kind of worldwide Nabokov renaissance. Editions ranging from the substantial to the complete are appearing in unprecedented abundance. Of special note abroad are the uniform Rowohlt series in Germany, the Anagrama books in Spain, Guanda's semi-annual cadence for some sixteen volumes together with Bompiani's projected plump two-volume *Classici* in Italy, and the Rivages editions and the forthcoming *Pléiade* in France. Russian versions of Nabokov's works—including various translations from his English—are proliferating. Here we have two basic categories: the meticulously prepared *Collected Works* in progress at Ardis of Ann Arbor (a product, as literature is called these days, of guaranteed fidelity) on one hand, and, on the other, the results of a Soviet rush to get Nabokov into print while *glasnost'* and paper supplies last. This second product varies wildly. There is a handful of refined, courageous scholars (one in particular) struggling for accuracy; there are well-meaning but shoddy reprints from whatever sources were available; there are some pretty awful translations from the English; and, alas for *glasnost'*, we see from the 1988 publication of *Dar* [*The Gift*], that the claws of political censorship are but half-clipped.

In Nabokov's adopted country there is good news indeed. Nearly all his fictional works are being assembled under the roomy roof of a new publisher, and an extensive, well produced, and properly distributed American Nabokov should soon be available.

The letters included in this volume represent only a small part of Nabokov's correspondence. They have been selected with certain general criteria in mind, and most of them reflect one or more of the following facets of Nabokov:

1. his evolution as a writer and insights into his creative process
2. his academic activity



3. his passions: lepidoptera and chess
4. certain important details of his life
5. his family relationships
6. his artistic and personal morality
7. the humor and originality with which he composed everything from a grocery list or the dressing-down of a derailed biographer to letters of importance regarding family or artistic matters.

The above are not dry scholastic categories, but themes that will fascinate the reader as they develop with the intricacy, symmetry, and suspense of a multifaceted novel by Nabokov. And *Lolita's* incredible adventures alone could be a novel.

When he was preparing his books for publication, Nabokov's occasional absent-mindedness during the physical process of writing was counterbalanced by microscopic attention to detail at the text's crucial stages: the exactitude of thought and often the research that creation entailed during the work's conception, and a final check of every word in proof. In the interim, the "passion of the scientist" could propel him past a lapse, but the "precision of the artist" compelled him to return eventually and fix that lapse. The occasional typo or other error will, of course, haunt the most carefully checked text, but Nabokov did all he could to forestall such mishaps, and a sampling of his corrections, particularly those to the proofs of the first edition of *Lolita*, is included to illustrate the meticulous care he gave a nascent work.

The preparation of these lists for the present volume meant, in effect, retracing every detail of Nabokov's 1955 revisions, to be certain that the ghosts of typos and rejects, as well as the author's emendations, had been properly resurrected.

Such attentive checking of Nabokov texts yields welcome by-products. One is reminded, for instance, that, no matter how many times one rereads his works, there is always some previously undiscovered surprise. Take the encounter with Rita described at the beginning of Chapter 26, Part Two, of *Lolita*. The episode is not a crucial element

of the book, and the casual reader might tend to gloss over it. That would be a pity:

She was twice Lolita's age and three quarters of mine: a very slight, dark-haired, pale-skinned adult, weighing a hundred and five pounds, with charmingly asymmetrical eyes, an angular, rapidly sketched profile, and a most appealing *ensellure* to her supple back—I think she had some Spanish or Babylonian blood. I picked her up one depraved May evening somewhere between Montreal and New York, or more narrowly, between Toylestown and Blake, at a darkishly burning bar under the sign of the Tigermoth, where she was amiably drunk: she insisted we had gone to school together, and she placed her trembling little hand on my ape paw.

The "Babylonian blood," the "asymmetrical eyes," the "rapidly sketched profile" are really not sketchy at all; they create a more specific sensation of everything about the girl than a page of toiled-over particulars. And Toylestown and Blake, and the "darkishly burning bar" (its name perhaps adjusted by Humbert for the image's sake) with its namesakes whirling and thumping about the neon sign, and the "depraved May evening" itself—*that* is original writing, where the concentrated image rules, where style and substance merge, as they should, to give the reader an agreeable spinal chill. Little pitfalls lurk, it is true, for the avid analyst with his deconstructionist lingo. Sometimes things are *exactly* what they seem; I think it is safe to say, for instance, that Humbert's "ape paw" has nothing to do with the animal laboring over a charcoal drawing in the author's afterword to *Lolita*, although someone's printout may dispute me. Then someone else, after more research, may conclude that the newspaper account cited by Nabokov as his inspiration for the book's theme never existed at all, and that the artistic animal was placed in the cage whose bars it is reproducing simply to enchant the unwary symbol-hunter.

The point, however, is the image, the "feel" one gets from the combination "ape paw," and how that combination came to be. The process went more or less like this: Nabokov had lived with the image,

the “undeveloped film” as he once described it to me, for a long time. An embryonic Humbert was already waiting in the wings of *The Gift* (published in serial form as *Dar* in 1937–38) to be written into a book that one of the novel’s characters was contemplating. This hairy, ape-like quality embodied to Nabokov both the grotesqueness and the pathos of the monstrous character that already lived within his artistic womb. A kind of Humbert, complete with those traits, came to life when the “film” was partially developed to yield *The Enchanter* (*Volshebnik*, written in 1939, not published until the posthumous French and English-language editions of 1986). When drafting *Lolita* Nabokov may have considered “apelike,” even “simian.” He may have considered a repetition of “hand,” or even “arm.” Yet he chose more simple, direct, and vivid words. In reply to a question much favored by interviewers, Nabokov would say that he thought in images rather than in any specific language. Nevertheless—and it is especially easy to find examples in the letters, particularly in the 1940s and early 1950s—he was still, at *some* level of consciousness, translating *some* images and locutions from their Russian (and occasionally their French) formulation. Not the meticulously studied strata of Americana amid which *Lolita* was finally set, but elements of the book, for instance, that had existed in his mind when he still had no idea he would one day become an American writer. Thus he instinctively ended up with the words “ape” and “paw”—but he wrote “ape’s paw” and not “ape paw,” for that felt somehow closer to the cozy Russian combination *obezyanya lapa* which he had long associated with the character. And only when he was correcting proofs (corrections list, 9 July 1955, 372:11)—the last chance, as it were, before the still adjustable creation in one’s mind congeals into its first concrete form—did he reduce it to “ape,” thereby avoiding the awkward and ambiguous double possessive “my ape’s paw.”

This peek through the magnifying glass is but one illustration of the infinitely diligent attention to detail that must accompany creative genius in order to produce a paragraph so concentrated and evocative, yet superficially so straightforward as the one cited above. And then, as one makes last-minute emendations to the proof of *this* very page, one’s imagination is suddenly drawn through the magnifying glass

into the looking glass. One pictures a future editor or scholar hunched, with his own lens, over a page of proofs that reproduce the corrections made by Vladimir Nabokov to the proofs of the Olympia *Lolita*, as corrected by Dmitri Nabokov for *Vladimir Nabokov: Letters, 1940-1977*, and destined for inclusion, say, in *Letters About Vladimir Nabokov, 1977-2001*. And, like the future selves of the astronaut in 2001 and the future kings in *Macbeth*, other editors and scholars loom, dimly reflected in the background of one's fantasy, as the looking glass multiplies into an infinite hall of mirrors, and time and place are neatly blurred into the timeless, placeless dream dimension that transpires, here and there, through the texture of the original Nabokov's texts.

At first, the present collection was to be limited, linguistically, to letters written in English and, chronologically, to those written after Nabokov came to America in 1940. It was subsequently decided to expand those parameters somewhat, both in order to set the stage for the American period, and to bring Nabokov's personal facets into sharper focus. Correspondence with members of the family and with other Russians was, except where noted, conducted in Russian. The English translations of these letters and of the occasional letter in French are by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with Véra Nabokov. Where there might have been doubt in the reader's mind as to the language used for an entire letter or for an individual expression, explanatory notes appear.

The Nabokov Archive has yielded such a wealth of material that at least one further volume is planned. It will include correspondence between Nabokov and émigré literary figures, his parents, and his wife, categories which are represented by only a few examples in the present collection.

Nabokov sometimes transliterated Russian letters into English characters simply to humor the faithful Royal typewriter that accompanied the family on travels across America and Europe. In other cases he did it for fun, as in a letter to his sister of 26 November 1967 that contains jocular Russian transliterations of Elena Sikorski's presumed jocular French pronunciation. Rendering such multilingual nuance in a manner comprehensible to the reader who might

know neither Russian nor French was tricky. So was translating the little poem Nabokov wrote on a postcard to his sister in September, 1970, and the illustrations of Russian prosody, camouflaged in matter-of-fact sentences, that he sent to his brother Kirill in 1930. In such cases I have tried to provide English equivalents that preserve both sense and form, and prefer not to think of what will happen when translations into other tongues start rolling in. And it would not surprise me if some Soviet translator, without consulting us, were to attempt reconverting into Russian the letters that have been painstakingly Englished, for this has already happened with at least one Nabokov poem.

Transliteration is a thorny matter. I have followed the method set forth by Nabokov in his translation of *Eugene Onegin* (1964), but have done so somewhat nonexclusively. Generally accepted spellings of well-known names, titles, etc., have been left undisturbed. Nabokov's own usages varied widely over the years, and have not been altered. But enough gray areas remain—*Nikolai Gogol*, which in his "author's copy," VN retitled *Nikolay Gogol*; "Chernyshevski" in the English version of *The Gift* who, according to the rules, ought to be spelled "Chernīshevski"; other cases where several factors must be considered—to make consistency elusive. The Russian й and ы are particularly slippery characters, and no amount of revision seems to make y, ĭ, i, etc. represent them with total discipline.

With a couple of exceptions the letters from Nabokov to his sister Elena and to his brother Kirill are among those published in Russian under the title *Perepiska s sestroy* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985). The correspondence with Edmund Wilson has been separately published as *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

There was often a reciprocal epistolary collaboration between Vladimir and Véra Nabokov. On occasion he would indicate the gist of a letter to be written, his wife would compose part or all of the text, and he would sign it. On other occasions he preferred, for one reason or another, that she sign a letter in which every word was his. Véra Nabokov was, among other things, her husband's typist for



many years. By the late 1960s the escalation of correspondence and other matters made a secretary indispensable. Jacqueline Callier was engaged and has been of great assistance to the Nabokovs ever since. Russian-language typing has, over the years, been done almost exclusively by Véra Nabokov and Elena Sikorski.

Nabokov generally sacrificed most other pursuits to the pursuit of his art. When he did take the time to write letters, the stimuli were family ties, close friendship, and aesthetic, professional, or scientific matters that required the authority of his signature. He replied to critics only when his artistic or personal integrity was questioned. He wrote to newspapers and magazines on those rare occasions when an important matter of fact or of morality needed to be set right. He was moved by the letters of certain fans, but felt he could not sacrifice writing time to embark upon exchanges with them, and only seldom did he find some exceptional quality in a fan letter that caused him to break this rule. Among the most touching letters were those in which the return address had been deliberately omitted to make it clear that neither the author's time nor his signature was being solicited; I recall one in particular, signed "a little Nabokov." Then again, the whims of fate and filing caused the loss of a few special letters that had been set aside for reply, and no other trace of name or address remained. An exceptional letter from Israel, received and hopelessly misplaced many years ago, was one of those that caused Nabokov special chagrin.

In Montreux, in his later years, Nabokov often lacked the time to answer even the the most deserving letters. At the suggestion of Edmund Wilson—who even sent a sample—cards were printed containing a brief note of thanks and explanation for would-be correspondents.

Autograph hunters were a subspecies apart. Our files abound with cards to which are affixed reproductions of Nabokov photographs, of varying origin and quality, with space provided for the author's signature. Sometimes books would arrive with a request that they be inscribed and returned to some distant address. Or a waiter in some resort hotel would approach the Nabokovs' table, volume in hand, begging that it be signed for his boss or for some client. Nabokov



despised the autograph industry, with its bookstore signature orgies and a commerce as brisk as that in baseball cards. He inscribed books only for relatives and close friends, and on certain other exceptional occasions. One of the few autographs he ever sent to an unknown postulant was the result of humanitarian compassion: the chap had written that it was the last wish of his father, condemned to imminent death by cancer. But a year or so later there was a new request, in the same forgetful hand: the last wish murmured by his doomed son was for a Nabokov autograph (or perhaps the order was inverse).

Of particular beauty and interest were the drawings with which Nabokov sometimes decorated letters or books destined for a small number of special people. The drawings that appeared on letters, or on separate sheets and cards, were sometimes figurative, sometimes fantastic, sometimes both at once, with a dash of the unique Nabokovian humor that colors his writing. In the book inscriptions, on the other hand, they almost always represented butterflies, generally nonexistent but often zoologically plausible, and sometimes with invented taxonomic appellations to match. A collection of Nabokov's drawings will appear in a volume of personal recollections, now in preparation.

Rather than overload this introduction with detail, Matthew Bruccoli and I have preferred to place explanatory notes wherever they might be most useful and most readily available to the reader, who will also encounter some amusing surprises. For instance, it has long been a mystery to me, who knew Nabokov well, how the notion could have been born among those unacquainted with him that he was austere, cold, somehow inhuman. Perhaps it was because of his intransigence in artistic matters, his intolerance of philistinism, and his disengagement from chic sociopolitical issues. Nabokov once said:

My characters cringe as I come near them with my whip. I have seen a whole avenue of imagined trees losing their leaves at the threat of my passage.

(1977 BBC interview)

Yet, in his real life and daily discourse, Nabokov was the warmest and most humorous of men, and even his writing took a back seat when he could directly intervene on behalf of an unfortunate man or beast. It is, perhaps, this very dichotomy that is beyond some readers, the kind who move their lips as they read, who are certain the author is giving them slices of his life, and seek out reflected slices of their own to "identify with":

as if we were no longer able  
to write long poems  
on any other subject than ourselves!

A. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, tr. V. Nabokov  
(New York: Bollingen, 1964)

What upset Pushkin is true of prose as well, and true more than ever today. Letters, on the other hand, allow personality to transpire unrefracted, and these letters will afford the reader unprecedented glimpses of the private Nabokov.

We now have an autobiographical triptych of Vladimir Nabokov: *Speak, Memory*; *Strong Opinions*; and *Letters*. The first of the three books is a meticulously constructed real-life narrative of great beauty. The second is a fascinating collection of facts and sometimes iconoclastic views. The posthumously published third now gives us a direct and spontaneous portrait of the artist—Nabokov from the horse's mouth, as it were.

As for literary biography by other parties, there are, of course, various horses and various parts of horses. However, the reader is advised not to despair: a two-volume Nabokov book by Brian Boyd is due in 1990, and it promises to be a thoroughbred.

## EDITORIAL NOTE

The editorial headings provide bibliographical and archival information for each letter. Thus:

Recipient (or writer)	Description & location of the document
Date (if not on the letter.)	Place of writing (if not on the letter)

All unlocated letters are in the Vladimir Nabokov Archive, Montreux, Switzerland. ALS denotes an autograph (handwritten) letter signed; TLS denotes a typed letter signed; TL denotes an unsigned typed letter; cc denotes a carbon copy of a TL.

The placement and form of the return address and date on each letter have been retained except when the information is irregularly positioned; in these cases the information has been styled as place followed by date.

Typing or scribal errors have been silently corrected by Véra Nabokov or Dmitri Nabokov. Deletions made by Mrs. Nabokov or Dmitri Nabokov have been identified. Underlined words have been printed in italic type.

The letters often incorporate words from other languages. Russian and French words in English-language letters are translated, except for familiar French terms.