**(Contd…5)**

dub today surprised American officials "Fascists". The surprise is 30 years late.

The readers of Nabokov's book will notice the extraordinary similarity between the present attitude of former Leninists and disgruntled Stalinists in this country toward Soviet Russia and the unpopular opinions Russian intellectuals kept expressing in émigré periodicals during the three decades immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution, while our enthusiastic radicals were prostrating themselves in adoration before Soviet Russia. One has to assume that the émigré political writers either were many years ahead of their time in the understanding of the true spirit and inevitable evolution of the Soviet regime, or that they possessed an intuition and a foresight bordering on the miraculous.

We vividly visualise Miss Braun's college years. Not so with the author of Conclusive Evidence, for he has nothing to say whatsoever about the classes he surely must have attended. After leaving Russia at the outset of the Soviet era, Nabokov completed his education at Cambridge University. From 1922 to 1940, he dwelt in various parts of Europe, mainly Berlin and Paris. Incidentally, it is curious to compare Nabokov's rather gruesome impressions of Berlin between the two wars with Mr Spender's contemporaneous but far more lyrical recollections (as published in the Partisan a couple of years ago), especially the bit about "relentlessly handsome German youths".

In describing his literary activities during the years of voluntary exile in Europe, Mr Nabokov adopts the somewhat annoying method of referring to himself in the third person as "Sirin" - a literary pseudonym under which he was, and still is, well known in the limited but highly cultured and discriminating world of Russian expatriates.

It is true that having practically stopped being a Russian writer, he is free to discuss Sirin's work as separate from his own. But one is inclined to think that his true purpose here is to project himself, or at least his most treasured self, into the picture he paints.

One is reminded of those problems of "objectivity" that the philosophy of science brings up. An observer makes a detailed picture of the whole universe but when he has finished he realises that it still lacks something: his own self. So he puts himself in it too. But again a "self" remains outside and so forth, in an endless sequence of projections, like those advertisements that depict a girl holding a picture of herself holding a picture of herself holding a picture that only coarse printing prevents one's eye from making out. In fact, Nabokov has gone a step further and under the mask of Sirin has projected a tertiary persona called Vasili Shishkov. This action was the outcome of a ten-year-old feud he had been carrying with the most gifted of the émigré critics, George Adamovich, who had rejected at first, then reluctantly accepted and finally admired with many an enthusiastic flourish Sirin's prose, but still kept pooh-poohing his verse. With the sporting co-operation of a review's editor, Nabokov-Sirin assumed the name of Shishkov. On an August day in 1939 Adamovich, reviewing in the Russian- language newspaper Posledni ja Novosti (published in Paris) the 69th issue of the quarterly Sovremennyja Zapiski (also published in Paris), lavished inordinate praise on Shishkov's poem The Poets and suggested that at this late date the Russian emigration might have at last produced a great poet.

In the fall of the same year, in the same newspaper, Sirin described at length an imaginary interview he had had with "Vasili Shishkov". In a groggy but still game reply Adamovich said that he doubted it was a hoax but added that Sirin might be inventive enough to enact inspiration and genius that would greatly surpass his, Sirin's, capacities. Very soon after that the World War II put an end to Russian literature in Paris.

I am afraid I cannot quite believe the author of Conclusive Evidence when, in his recollection of literary life, he stresses the perfect indifference he has always had in regard to criticism, adverse or favourable. Anyway, a ghoulish, vindictive, and sometimes rather foolish streak used to show in his own critical articles.

How do we learn the great secret wrapped in words? We see that a foreigner generally fails to acquire a perfect, native sense of their import. He has not lived from infancy in the quiet reception and unconscious study of them, and felt how one word is allied to others and how one age - with its writings, its unrecorded traditions and its common style of conversation - flows into another. In her beautiful, compassionate, intensely feminine quest in the kingdom of things past, Miss Braun has one difficulty less to surmount than Nabokov has. True, the Russian author had English governesses when he was a child and spent three college years in England. To bring up Conrad's case in reference to Nabokov's novels written in English (The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Bend Sinister) would mean missing the point of the latter's achievement. Conrad - whose English style, anyway, was a collection of glorified clichés - had not had 20 years of intense participation in Polish literature behind him when he started on his British career. Nabokov, on the other hand, when he switched to English, was the author of several novels and numerous short stories in Russian, and indeed had gained a lasting place in Russian literature, despite the fact that his books were banned in his mother country. The only analogy in this respect is that both men might have chosen French as readily as English.

As a matter of fact, Nabokov's first attempt, in the middle Thirties, at original prose in a language not his own was a story he wrote in French (Mademoiselle O) which Paulhan published in Mesures (an English version of this, with most of the fiction weeded out by its author, appeared in The Atlantic Monthly and was reprinted in Nine Stories). The present reviewer has an odd recollection of hearing Nabokov lecture in brilliant French at a certain soirée littéraire - in 1937, I believe - in a Parisian concert hall. A Hungarian lady writer, today forgotten but then very much à la mode as the author of a French bestseller (something about a fishing cat), who was scheduled to speak that night, had wired a few hours before the lecture that she could not come, and Gabriel Marcel, one of the organisers of that series of talks, had prevailed upon Nabokov to appear as a last-minute substitute with a lecture in French on Pushkin (later published in the Nouvelle Revue Française). The lecturer's acte gratuite (as Mr Auden charmingly misgenders it) was prefaced by a curious movement, a kind of whirlpool in the audience. The whole Hungarian colony had bought tickets; some of them were leaving upon finding out about the change in the programme. Other Hungarians stayed on in blissful ignorance. Most of the French contingent had drifted away too. In the wings, the Hungarian Envoy was violently shaking hands with Nabokov whom he mistook for the lady's husband. Alerted Russian expatriates had loyally rallied and were doing their best to stitch up the ever widening holes in the house. Paul and Lucy Léon, faithful friends of Nabokov, had brought James Joyce as a special surprise; a Hungarian soccer team occupied the first row.

Today Mr Nabokov must find it strange to recall the literary vagaries of his young years. With his wife and son, he now lives in this country of which he is a citizen; lives happily, I understand, in the simple disguise of an obscure college professor of literature with spacious vacations devoted to butterfly hunting in the West. In lepidopterological circles, he is known as a somewhat eccentric taxonomist with analytic rather than synthetic leanings. In American scientific journals, he has published various discoveries of his own relating to new species or forms of butterflies; and - a scientific tradition that seems to impress so much lay reporters - other entomologists have named butterflies and moths after him. The American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard preserve Nabokov's type specimens. On a visit to the latter institution I was shown several tiny moths - belonging to a marvellously multiform genus - which Nabokov discovered in the Wasatch Mountains of Utah in 1943. One of these McDunnough has named Eupithecia nabokovi. This is a delightfully satisfying resolution of a certain thematic line of Conclusive Evidence where Nabokov tells how passionately he had dreamed in his boyhood of discovering a new member of that particular group.

Barbara Braun's poise and taste, the purity and simplicity of her style as sparkling as a New England brook, are qualities not shared by the author of Conclusive Evidence. One cannot help being irritated by certain peculiarities of Nabokov's manner, by his casual use of terms that little-known scientists have invented for little-known diseases; by his general tendency to dabble in esoteric sensations; by his methods of transliteration (he uses one system - the correct one - for rendering samples of Russian speech, and another system, pockmarked with compromise, for transliterating names); or by such whims of his as suddenly throwing in a chess problem (without giving the key move which is Bishop to -). His admirers may, however, retort that the author of Alice Through The Looking Glass devoted his frontispiece to an excellent chess composition that surely not many of his little readers could be presumed to enjoy.

Another matter that cannot fail to offend a certain type of reader (upper-middle-class in the cultural sense) is Nabokov's attitude toward such writers as Freud, Mann and Eliot, whom tradition and good manners have taught one to respect together with Lenin and Henry James. At the oneiromancy and mythogeny of psychoanalysis Nabokov has been poking rude fun since the Twenties. Thomas Mann he places in the Jules Romain Rolland-Galsworthy subfamily, somewhere between Upton and Lewis, as he irreverently phrases it (Romain being mathematically equal to Sinclair). He is prone to throw a veritable fit of sarcastic glee when high middle-class critics place the plaster of Mann and Eliot beside the marble of Proust and Joyce.

Few people will share his contention that Eliot's poetry is essentially platitudinous.

As Mr Cleanth Brooks so ably puts it somewhere, "whether or not Mr Eliot noticed this passage (something in poor Miss Weston's work) or intends a reference, the violation of a woman makes a very good symbol (my italics) of the process of secularisation". I suppose Nabokov is merely trying to be witty when he remarks that the popular success of Eliot's recent play belongs to the same order as "Zootism, Existentialism and Titoism," and, surely, all those whose muse, née Eliotovich, is so huskily vocal in little magazines, will fervently agree that calling T S E "the Wally Simpson of American literature" is a sally in very bad taste indeed. Then, too, there is his contempt for Dostoevski which makes Russians shudder and is disapproved of in the academic circles of our greatest universities. Perhaps Nabokov's immunity to the sentimental cults American critics have preserved since the Twenties and Thirties is due to his having gone, during those years, through a Zeitgeist-less phase in the world of Russian ascetic exile far removed from "Jazz Age" and "pre-Crash" fashions.

But with all its shortcomings Conclusive Evidence still remains a significant contribution. It is "conclusive evidence" in regard to many things, among which the most obvious is that this world is not as bad as it seems. Mr Nabokov is to be congratulated on having performed a very capable and very necessary job. His memoirs will find a permanent place on the book lover's shelf side-by-side with Leo Tolstoy's Childhood, T S Elmann's Amen Corner and Barbara Braun's When Lilacs Last, which I now propose to discuss. n This is the greater part of Chapter Sixteen of Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited. The book is published by Everyman at £10.99. To order a copy at the special price of £8.99, plus 99p p&p, freephone 0500 600102.

## Eat butterflies with me?

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*Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, Interviews and Letters to the Editor*

by Vladimir Nabokov, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy. Penguin, 576 pp., £12.99, November, 78

Strong Opinions​, a collection of Nabokov’s interviews, reviews and essays published in 1973, contains an interview with the great man so brazenly bad, so shocking in each successive clause, that as long as you’re reading it, you’re dreaming of the movie version. Picture Benedict Cumberbatch hunched over a legal pad, sweating lightly, pressing Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (Jared Harris) to admit that a sentence about a character paring his fingernails was inspired by James Joyce. Admit it he does not: ‘The phrase you quote is an unpleasant coincidence.’ Cumberbatch’s sweating intensifies. His jumper has been nibbled by the only moths on earth that are beneath his idol’s notice. Vladimir toys sardonically with the rook on his chessboard as Véra (Tilda Swinton, wearing the whitest wig money can buy) brings in a tray. ‘Are you aware that I saved Lolita from the incinerator?’ she asks, as she pours the tea. It is her only line.

In this new collection of ephemera, Think, Write, Speak, Nabokov identifies that industrious interviewer, Alfred Appel, Jr, as ‘my pedant ... Every writer should have such a pedant. He was a student of mine at Cornell and later he married a girl I’d taught at another time, and I understand that I was their first shared passion.’ Imagine it: erotic unification over this man, someone who hated music in public places, fascists and Bolshevists, the feel of satin; who was dolphin-like in his movements, an obsessive self-googler before easy engines existed, who could not spell ‘tongue’ correctly on the first try. Every writer should have such a pedant – every writer should have two, returning in the evenings to commune over the crucial works, the neglected fragments. Perhaps, on some hardly-to-be-hoped-for day, discovering themselves brother and sister.

A complete biography lurks behind the slow accumulation of these pages. We begin, what could be more boyish, with descriptions of the ‘wild dark-grey trousers’ of Cambridge, with paeans to Rupert Brooke, with bubbling appreciations of not very good poetry. He is an émigré, and unmistakeably happy to be at work building his name: this happiness is what finally convinces us that he truly didn’t miss all that White Russian money, gone up to heaven like vapour. Gradually he becomes famous, and is persecuted with so many questions about nymphets and Freud that some essential openness closes, the openness you see in the early letters to Edmund Wilson, in the avalanche of epithets he piles on Véra during her stay in a sanatorium before they were married. From the comfortable vantage of a Swiss eyrie, the myths and just-so stories are launched and refined. ‘What have you learned from Joyce?’ ‘Nothing.’ ‘Gogol?’ ‘I was careful not to learn anything from him.’ If Nabokov and I have one thing in common, it’s that we were both careful not to learn anything from Gogol.

In this book a soft, damp skin hardens into a polished and uncrushable carapace – reminiscent of those palmetto bugs I used to smash with a Bible in my apartment in Florida, which could be flattened to the thinness of a dime and still live. On the first page, he is enthusiastic, deferential, eager; by the last he is a triple-reinforced roach that cannot be killed. He isn’t a regular roach, though. He’s an Art Roach. He buffs and buffs himself, until the Alps outside the window are reflected in his own high shine, and entering from stage left, we see the shape of Véra.

After 1958, Think, Write, Speak contains little except interviews; when an answer sounds like an echo in a marble hall, it is because he has repurposed it from Speak, Memory. The sameness is unrelieved – until the late 1960s, when various malpractising journalists begin asking him about hippies, which is pleasant. (‘I feel nothing but contemptuous pity for the illiterate drug-dazed hoodlums I have happened to observe, but I do not assume that all hippies are violent cretins.’) We end with the hilarious statement, the fitting and most Nabokovian lie: ‘If I do have any obsessions I’m careful not to reveal them in fictional form.’

There is a static quality to Nabokov’s earliest reminiscences. The rooms of his childhood are presented as chessboards, waiting for the mysterious animating force of the game. ‘I see again my schoolroom in Vyra,’ he writes in Speak, Memory,

the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of wellbeing, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.

I would remember this childhood too; we all would. It takes place in a paperweight. ‘A coloured spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life.’ A young aristocrat, 75 per cent composed of foraged mushrooms, asks his pristine parents what an erection is, and they tell him that Tolstoy has died. Who can’t relate? But while these early impressions are documented photographically, his young adulthood is less thoroughly treated. The world, which previously creaked on its axis, has begun to gather speed. He is expelled from his nursery, a staggering inheritance from that gay leathern uncle is won and lost in what seems only a day, his father is assassinated while attempting to shield the real target. But the elision of these years has less to do with memory and more to do with the fact that to be young and unformed is embarrassing to such a man; to see the sun of your encompassing power on the horizon, but not to be able to grasp it, or even to look at it directly. In the earliest essays, we see species, categories, periodic tables; languages and countries; real and alternate histories are set before him and we see him reach out a hand towards what he is, what he is going to be. Anything is possible. His mother has been all morning in the woods and parks of St Petersburg; she lets the bounty of him fall to the floor with an exaggerated pouf!

Perhaps this is why Chapter 15 of Glory glows so among his writings. It is where he chooses, and his doppelgängers choose – even though, as he states in the preface to the later English edition, he was careful to give the protagonist No Talent. The temptation to do so must have been strong, for a man whose eyes were constructed like Aladdin’s to see dazzle in the dark. The rubies move: they are better, they are beetles.

When he entered the university it took Martin a long time to decide on a field of study. There were so many, and all were fascinating. He procrastinated on their outskirts, finding everywhere the same magical spring of vital elixir. He was excited by the viaduct suspended over an alpine precipice, by steel come to life, by the divine exactitude of calculation. He understood that impressionable archaeologist who, after having cleared the path to as yet unknown tombs and treasures, knocked on the door before entering, and, once inside, fainted with emotion. Beauty dwells in the light and stillness of laboratories: like an expert diver gliding through the water with open eyes, the biologist gazes with relaxed eyelids into the microscope’s depths, and his neck and forehead slowly begin to flush, and, tearing himself away from the eyepiece, he says, ‘That settles everything.’

After reading that I always feel a whoosh, as if I’d just stepped back from the edge of a cliff. We almost lost him to the study of viaducts. Instead, he chose literature, the only dark capable of containing all that array, as well as occasional detours into ‘the classification of certain small blue butterflies on the basis of their male genitalic structure’. Well, obviously.

Erudition is delicate to dissect. It is one of the little creatures that has learned to look like other things: bark and background, eyes. His seems as if it must have developed over uncountable years, but that is not so – we witness him learn, in these early essays, to lay his pattern precisely on a sheet of paper. To read them is to be inside his desk, in a snow of notes, among the worldly flurry of what drew his attention. We mark the sharpening of his little knife: ‘The author pretends to be an idiot, but why isn’t clear,’ he writes in ‘A Few Words on the Wretchedness of Soviet Fiction’. ‘I shall limit myself to an excerpt. Here it goes: she leaves, he immerses himself in party work. And the story ends like this: ‘“Goddammit,” he said, “we have huge economic opportunities.”’ We follow his excursions into nostalgia: ‘At a fair, in a remote little town, I won a cheap porcelain pig at target shooting. I abandoned it on the shelf at the hotel when I left town. And in doing so, I condemned myself to remember it. I am hopelessly in love with this porcelain pig.’ And we receive his unchanging thesis: ‘Though I personally would be satisfied to spend the whole of eternity gazing at a blue hill or a butterfly, I would feel the poorer if I accepted the idea of there not existing still more vivid means of knowing butterflies and hills.’

The day is visible somehow in these interviews, slanting down through tall windows, and I found myself thinking very often of what he had for lunch, perhaps because of those cutlets and compotes so frequently described in the early letters where he calls Véra ‘Pussykins’ and ‘Tufty’. To read the interviews is to see the whirlwind of index cards, the dry white fountain, the dead leaves of his prepared answers and the breeze of his off-guard ones. He is most alive in an interview with Sports Illustrated about butterflies. ‘Chort!’ he exclaims. ‘I have been doing this since I was five or six, and I find myself using the same Russian swear words. Chort means “the devil”. It’s a word I never use otherwise.’ He looks at the landscape and says: ‘It looks like a giant chess game is being played around us.’ (Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die.) While Véra shops in the supermarket, he tells the interviewer that

when I was younger I ate some butterflies in Vermont to see if they were poisonous. I didn’t see any difference between a Monarch butterfly and a Viceroy. The taste of both was vile, but I had no ill effects. They tasted like almonds and perhaps a green cheese combination. I ate them raw. I held one in one hot little hand and one in the other. Will you eat some with me tomorrow for breakfast?

Where is the butterfly-eater, exuberant and mad in the manner of a ten-year-old naturalist, absorbed in a particle that looks like the world, in the rest of these ossified answers? And what is Véra buying in the supermarket – almonds? Green cheese?

I am not one of his pedants, yet I thought of them often as I reread his work. Nabokov and I are hardly a match made in heaven – I’m stumped by the most elementary brainteasers, every chess game I’ve ever played has lasted at least two hours and no one has been able to win, and when faced with a fictional family tree, I feel I’m trying to eat a Filofax. Still I revisit him: Speak, Memory, Lolita, my beloved Pnin, Pale Fire.

Pale Fire is a book that could be read for an entire lifetime, always on the verge of discovery, until finally, at the end, it shows up: a bigger, more respectable, more transcendental version of the assassin Gradus, walking towards the staggered flash of a million photographers. It has no solution because it is designed to work like human memory: returning obsessively to a secret passageway discovered in childhood, flight over a spine of mountains (read with the brain, the backbone, the little hairs), the hiding place of the crown jewels. The index is in the body – one reference will send us chasing after another, and the same scarlet pages crop up again and again on a darkness that is the inside of the eyelids.

Yet none of this highfaluting language conveys my bug-eyed discomfort when I actually read Pale Fire, clawing dutifully after every footnote, stuffing the commentary with post-its, triple-underlining phrases like ‘his brown shoes’, only pausing occasionally to see the white fountain of remixed and continuous life that John Shade saw when his heart stopped. Nabokov sets up problems to which it seems there should be answers, but he does not give answers, he gives rewards. That is why he is beloved, why people dedicate whole academic lives to him. White fountains at the end of the mind.

What is it about, except the foolish human feeling that literature is written directly to us, that it is a letter with an imperishable blank in the address? ‘I was holding all Zembla pressed to my heart.’ We are Kinbote tiptoeing across the lawn, holding the rubber-banded batches of index cards against our chest. We have chased down every lead, hunted down all the echoes, put ourselves in possession of the ultimate meaning. We have made a grand discovery: the story is about us. We will spirit it away, and fill in every blank with our own name.

Some of this shit is for chess people; he is a Sherlock Holmes who pops clues into his mouth for the sheer oral sensation. (It is appropriate, both in terms of his work and his profile, to think of him as an Alfred Hitchcock who insists on appearing in every frame of his movies, not just a single scene.) But how beautifully he speaks of it! ‘There is no time on the chessboard. Time replaced by a bottomless space,’ he said in one interview. ‘The knight jumps a square. But if, for example, it is at one side of the chessboard, then one wonders why it can’t jump from the other side, in the space beyond the chessboard. I have myself thought up problems which incorporate the possibility of a knight who flies off and then who comes back from that space.’ The knight is a character, the space is fiction, the flying off and the landing again is the work. ‘I suppose I am especially susceptible to the magic of games,’ Humbert confesses in Lolita. ‘In my chess sessions with Gaston I saw the board as a square pool of limpid water with rare shells and stratagems rosily visible upon the smooth tessellated bottom, which to my confused adversary was all ooze and squid-cloud.’ Conceptions of space, dimension, movement, strategy. Some of the books move on highways; some down corridors; some through wormholes; some sit stationary in the darkness of cinemas. Some go to college, where sometimes he is the student, slicing across the quad, and eventually the professor, patting his suit pocket for his notes: did he leave them on the train again? Chort!

Something curious and wonderful happens when you read his lectures: you slip into the flow and the logic of his reading. Towards the middle of them – as he is musing on a sentence from Dickens, say, which the word ‘heavy’ properly weights down – no one else is there. Certainly, there are no students, no Thomas Pynchons, no Ruth Bader Ginsburgs. The word Eigengrau means own grey, or intrinsic grey, or brain grey. It is what you see when you close your eyes. After a while you are in Nabokov’s own grey, turning down corridors, coming on the characters in their humble rooms, which are still inflected with the grandness of his childhood ones, they cannot help it. High ceilings, a patch of dazzling snow outside the window, a paperweight winking on the mantlepiece. I haven’t even read Bleak House – it is the cherished prerogative of an uneducated person, to save Bleak House for the end of the world – yet there I was, a little thread between my fingertips, following his dolphinish walk through the fog, and entering the place where Krook has spontaneously combusted.

In his lecture on Jane Austen, Nabokov uses the term ‘knight’s move’ to describe how Austen manoeuvres her characters from one side of the board to the other, emotionally. (The concept is invoked here too, less flatteringly, in a review of Hilaire Belloc.) ‘Fanny’s relief, and her consciousness of it, were quite equal to her cousins’, but a more tender nature suggested that her feelings were ungrateful, and [knight’s move] she really grieved because she could not grieve.’ What he himself does, then, might be called a queen’s move. If his protagonists are often cornered like the king, it is the language that rises up and flies diagonally across the board.

Consider the sentences we see particularly in Pnin, which collapse all distance in the final clause. ‘Dr Falternfels was writing and smiling; his sandwich was half-unwrapped; his dog was dead.’ Consider Humbert, making the leap off the board into the air:

All I know is that while the Haze woman and I went down the steps into the breathless garden, my knees were like reflections of knees in rippling water, and my lips were like sand, and –

‘That was my Lo,’ she said, ‘and these are my lilies.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘yes. They are beautiful, beautiful, beautiful!’

‘Are you a pervert, sir?’ goes one prominent line of questioning. In the absence of a cache of erotic letters about, say, a desire to frot schoolgirls on trains, a compulsion to cum into butterfly nets, the answer seems to have settled on ‘no’, with a certain amount of disappointment: in a century that stood in the shadow of Freud, there is no richer text than a pervert. No matter how buttoned up a biographer might be, it is his secret wish to discover that a writer is in possession of a hideous Phalloides that can flourish only in damp darkness. Instead, we have Pussykins and Tufty, descriptions of compotes, hopeless love for lost porcelain pigs.

‘It’s a very tender book,’ Nabokov insists, in an interview with L’Express. ‘An American map of tenderness.’ If you read Lolita as a young girl, you feel clearly, colourfully, photographically seen – someone is paying attention to the little tendon twitching at the side of your ankle! ‘The thousand eyes wide open in my eyed blood.’ I know many women of my generation who bear a half-shamed attachment to it, for the same reason many of them love Léon; the girl still nominally the focus. It is easy – it seemed easy to me, when I was a teenager – to discard the surrounding pervert, and simply keep his eye.

If Lolita is in many ways the most accessible of Nabokov’s novels, it is because it places the labyrinth outside, in the sunlight. After all, most people who read Lolita in a swoon of desire don’t want to fuck a child, they want to go on a road trip, and read Burma Shave billboards out loud from the passenger seat. It is a commonplace by now that Lolita is the greatest novel ever written not about love, but about advertising. Nubile red-lipsticked America – revealed at the crucial moment to be already corrupt – is fondled by the hoary hand of Europe! The war is over, the country’s right pocket is unaccountably deep, the road into the future has just been repaved. ‘And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared maps, ruined tour books, old tyres, and her sobs in the night – every night, every night – the moment I feigned sleep.’

I am reminded of my father-in-law (no, not like that), who once insisted on staying at a hotel called the Free Breakfast Inn simply because of the promise implicit in its name. All the other hotels also offered free breakfast, but only one of them was the Free Breakfast Inn, and that is what it means to be an American. Nabokov knew this, and seemed to delight in it, as Humbert delighted in Lolita’s banana-split vulgarity. The journey along these highways is designed for us, to keep our childish attention spans engaged so he can keep dallying with us. We stop at all the souvenir stands along the way; our side of the car is littered with movie magazines, empty Coke bottles, candy bar wrappers. We are wearing an outfit picked out and purchased for us: preposterous, gingham-checked, made to our measurements and revealing the midriff. The book is the bonbon produced so we don’t tell, and if further inducements are necessary, the movie will be playing later. Lolita is powered not just by the nostalgia that is but by the nostalgia that will be: Nabokov knows that there will be people in the future who are not just hungry for sandwiches, but want to eat tuna salad on white, at a drugstore counter, in the year 1947. If the child is pathetic for being susceptible to the image, the protagonist is more so – he lives in the belief that the mirage can be reached, that the projector playing footage of a girl directly into his eye will one day set a real cameo in the palm of his hand and he will have her. ‘Distant mountains. Near mountains. More mountains; bluish beauties never attainable, or ever turning into inhabited hill after hill.’

But what about the girl herself? ‘She cries every night,’ Véra pops in to say, ‘and the critics don’t hear her sobs.’ Véra pops in very often to defend Lolita, to underline some point of her husband’s, to deepen her with a real shadow. ‘Did you know I saved her from the incinerator?’ She rescued her once and she must keep rescuing her, for she knows something that her husband does not: Lolita in its second half is something we no longer want.

The road trips were their road trips, after all, to catch butterflies in the American west. The hotel bed in the centre of the book is their bed. If a pair of wings is fixed here, it belongs to them: by the time revenge, imprisonment and old age arrive, they are completely beside the point. In another interview with L’Express, Nabokov called America ‘the country where I’ve breathed most deeply’. It is the sky that travels down to fingertips and toes, surrounding an image which can never be held.

Such glamour accrued to him after Lolita that he is one of those 20th-century writers that readers fear to admit they don’t understand. It should not be so. Unusual minds do not always admit others, and some Pale Fires are not lucky enough to have Mary McCarthy as their first reader. Sometimes he is boring and overdazzled at the same time. Try reading Ada or Ardor with a headache and see if you don’t feel that you’re listening to the heartbeat of an overdosed magician. Try embarking on Bend Sinister – a book that seems to have been born of the trauma of once holding a Nansen passport – with a fever and see if you don’t spend the next few weeks chased by a secret policeman bent on arresting you for the crime of illiteracy. They keep crossing a bridge, it makes no sense. My head feels hot, my brain a bubble being blown by a 12-year-old girl ...\*

In​ Pale Fire Kinbote asks, ‘What if we awake one day, all of us, and find ourselves utterly unable to read?’ In Bend Sinister Nabokov speaks of ‘the recurrent dream we all know (finding ourselves in the old classroom, with our homework not done because of our having unwittingly missed ten thousand days of school)’. The books themselves often partake of that dream. Often the narrative slips into the interval just before sleep – you are following, following, and then suddenly your footprints are crossing through snow and carrying you into some grim, bureaucratically deranged, claustrophobic country. This is when it seems most futile to employ a critical lens at all: why are we applying waking standards to what are fundamentally sleepwalking works, stuffed with the jewels of little purple pills?

The problems he sets us are like the problems that Timosha, a conscientious child who will grow up to be a pedantic professor, encounters when he looks at his wallpaper with a head inflated by illness, trying to discern what governs the repeating pattern on his wallpaper:

It stood to reason that if the evil designer – the destroyer of minds, the friend of fever – had concealed the key of the pattern with such monstrous care, that key must be as precious as life itself and, when found, would regain for Timofey Pnin his everyday health, his everyday world; and this lucid – alas, too lucid – thought forced him to persevere in the struggle.

In Speak, Memory, we visit the original sickbed: ‘My numerous childhood illnesses brought my mother and me still closer together. As a little boy, I showed an abnormal aptitude for mathematics, which I completely lost in my singularly talentless youth. This gift played a horrible part in tussles with quinsy or scarlet fever, when I felt enormous spheres and huge numbers swell relentlessly in my aching brain.’

I hate it when my tussles with quinsy rob me of my abnormal aptitude for mathematics. Rather than coming alive when you are delirious, his scenes close – bookcases refuse to revolve at the touch of a button, portraits no longer conceal safes. The mind is overtaken by one panicked question: what the hell are you talking about, dude? It’s very comfortable to read him in full possession of your faculties, and it’s possible that his madcap plots, with their hint of sped-up silent movie footage, never entirely came off because he was so manifestly sane – not a madman, undeluded, not a pervert in the smallest degree. But to read him from inside a balloon, holding a passport that no longer means very much to the outside world, is a different thing altogether. Borders do close overnight, the secret police are once more on the move and you are in bed with a fever. The pedant sometimes steps from the dark of a library, from the daylong light of an interview, into a different world.

I am not his pedant. My insights are more like those of poor Joan Clements, at the party at Pnin’s house: ‘But don’t you think – haw – that what he is trying to do – haw – practically in all his novels – haw – is – haw – to express the fantastic recurrence of certain situations?’ Even so, I was up all night. There I was, cocooned in my blankets, having missed ten thousand days of school, trying desperately to guess where the squirrel would pop up again, the lily pond, the bridle path felted with fallen leaves, the old man (was it him?) hunched up on a bench.

Nabokov​ gazes at a snowy slope outside the window. He is 65 years old; his nose is perfect. With wrists and palms, like his fictional professor, he outlines a portable world. Benedict Cumberbatch raises his pen once more over his notepad. He has been physically and mentally ruined by this experience and will die soon afterwards. ‘Learn to distinguish banality,’ Nabokov advises him, just before the film fades out. ‘Remember that mediocrity thrives on “ideas”. Beware of the modish message. Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint. Ignore allegories. By all means place the “how” above the “what” but do not let it be confused with the “so what”. Rely on the sudden erection of your small dorsal hairs.’

This is what he tells us again and again, to read a book with the brain and the spine, the spot between the shoulderblades – to walk back with him to that time of youth, riches, the shining array in the deep dark, and back to the moment when he chose.

Undecided what to undertake, what to select, Martin gradually rejected all that might take a too exclusive hold over him. Still to be considered was literature. Here, too, Martin found intimations of bliss: how thrilling was that humdrum exchange about weather and sport between Horace and Maecenas, or the grief of old Lear, uttering the mannered names of his daughters’ whippets that barked at him! Just as, in the Russian version of the New Testament, Martin enjoyed coming across ‘green grass’ or ‘indigo chiton’, in literature he sought not the general sense, but the unexpected, sunlit clearings, where you can stretch until your joints crunch, and remain entranced.

To travel back to that beginning is to walk with him a very long way, through green grass to sunlit clearings, from the trees of one continent to another. Your passport is this little nut you found. The symbol you have detected is your own footprint. ‘This one is an Angle Wing,’ he says, pointing out something nearly invisible to you. ‘It has a curiously formed letter C. It mimics a chink of light through a dead leaf. Isn’t that wonderful? Isn’t that humorous?’ And then his voice calls happily ahead of you, as if to the world and all the things in it: ‘Charming! Charming! Charming butterfly road!’

## Rhino-Breeder

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John Sturrock was the LRB’s consulting editor from 1993 until his death in August 2017. He had been the deputy editor of the TLS for many years before that. He translated Stendhal, Victor Hugo, Georges Perec and Proust, among others; and wrote books on Borges, structuralism, autobiography and the Pyrenees. The View from Paris, a collection of essays on postwar French intellectuals, was published in 1998. Many of those essays first appeared in the LRB, along with occasional pieces on cricket.

*Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977*

edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Bruccoli.

Weidenfeld, 582 pp., £29.95, February 1990

Nabokov liked to write standing up (‘Piles,’ he told a fellow-teacher at Cornell, who thought it might be some short cut to creativity), and his letters reflect that inflexible posture, being all backbone and no upholstery. But prize them we must, for bringing us this otherwise impregnably stylish man’s first, unscripted thoughts; letters at least he wrote and sent, without – that we hear of – asking for them back, to groom them for permanent annexation to his oeuvre. Writing casually, and for a readership of one, he can identify himself with his style (‘ ... I am almost exclusively a writer, and my style is all I have’) without having to prove himself by doing so stylishly. But when, post-Lolita, the interviewers come, with their pads and tape-machines, to test his spontaneity, the style has once again to become the man, and the record of each viva to be called in for reworking before being passed for publication (‘I am greatly distressed and disgusted by my unprepared answers ... These answers are dull, flat, repetitive, vulgarly phrased and in every way shockingly different from the “card” part of the interview’). It was a mark of resigned good sense therefore, not of inspiration, when, two years before he died, the New York Times asked if it could commission what it called the ‘ultimate interview’ with him, one conducted by himself. Point six and last in Nabokov’s majestic letter licensing this event reads: ‘My soul is mine. What you are going to get is an elegant and accurate shadowgraph on the brightest of walls.’ Souls were never his thing, they could but come under the nauseous heading of Human Interest which, he writes, ‘means Uncle Tom’s cabin to me (or Galsworthy’s drivel) and makes me sick, seasick’. Even when he himself turned to the supposedly soul-searching genre of autobiography and wrote a memoir of his early life – Conclusive Evidence, later to be called Speak, Memory – he defines it to a potential publisher as a hybrid between unqualified autobiography and a novel, the truth crossed with fiction, his life having been given ‘a definite plot’. Nabokov redrafts the old autobiographical contract in favour of the writer and against the basely inquisitive reader, form having the higher claim in his philosophy to fact.

As a letter-writer, we know Nabokov already from the at first comradely, then sharp, then finally embittered exchanges which he had over almost twenty years with Edmund Wilson: an epistolary novel in which a friendship shrank and died in the space separating two bad-tempered writers who could not agree politically about the Soviet Union nor find common ground over the rules of Russian and English metrics. There is an occasional aftershock to be felt from that exhilarating quarrel in the present volume, and some incomparably peremptory opinions on Russian and other literary topics from Nabokov. But the Selected Letters are too taken up with the practicalities of the writer’s life as a writer to have the same intellectual fire-power as the published letters to and from Wilson. This is Nabokov going perseveringly about his business: as a novelist in exile, with his way to make in a country and a language not his own; as a university teacher at once conscientious with his classes and unusual for wanting to teach them ‘how to read books’ (his stress); as a butterfly expert, either staking out specimens in a Harvard laboratory (a gentler version of Vlad the Impaler) or later, alfresco, way out West, in gangling pursuit of nettable rarities; and at last, once he has become the author of Lolita, as the fastidious object of an often tasteless public interest, looking humorously to his defences and writing without pause in his upper-crust hotel in Montreux. The letters are all about Nabokov, but many of them are too routine in subject and too plainly worded to be recognisably by him. A number, strange to say, do not even pretend to be by him, but are letters written by his wife Vera, to spare him further distraction or intrusion on his time; though Vera, it is true, can be a transparent pseudonym for Vladimir, as in the crushingly succinct answers which she returns to an asinine set of questions from Time and Tide as to how, when and where he wrote, and how he found inspiration:

Dear Sir,

My husband asks me to send you his answers to your questions of December 27th: 1. Pencil. 2. Anyhow. 3. Anywhere. 4. It finds me. He has also a question for you: Why do you spell his name with two ‘a’s?

Yours truly,

Mrs Vladimir Nabokov

Family togetherness in fact gets a little in the way in this volume, whose editor, Dmitri Nabokov, the novelist’s son, has chosen to include some short, decently fatherly but inconsequential letters addressed to his own younger, apparently scapegrace self, even though he promises us in his florid introduction that the Nabokov archive which he presides over will yield at least one more volume of letters, addressed to ‘émigré literary figures, his parents and his wife’. The trifles from that future volume which have gone into this more professional one were not such a good idea.

Despite the dates given in the subtitle, the earliest letters here come from before the war, when Nabokov was still a part of the liberal Russian diaspora in Berlin and Paris. They fix the tone and lay down many of the themes of what follows, for the years of still further exile after 1940, when he moved to the United States. Apart from some fond and exemplary letters to Vera, to whom, it seems, he wrote at the rate of a letter a day on the rare occasions when they were apart, there are letters to his brother Kirill in Prague, welcoming his attempts to write poetry but taking precise and ruthless issue with particular lines on technical grounds and for their triteness – ‘As a general rule, try to find new combinations of words (not for the sake of their novelty, but because every person sees things in an individual way and must find his own words for them’ – and letters to do with getting his books published in English, to a literary (‘or, rather, anti-literary’, he decides once he has met her) agent in New York and to a publisher in London, Hutchinson. Two of the novels he had recently published in Russian, Camera Obscura (which became Laughter in the Dark when he translated it for a second time himself) and Despair, both appeared here in 1936–7 on the list of the Hutchinson-owned John Long, where, writes the betrayed novelist, who has presumably been copytasting the books issuing from that too genteel imprint, Despair can only have stood out ‘like a rhinoceros in a world of humming birds’.

These are promisingly sane, resolute letters for Nabokov to have written, ahead of his own difficult removal into the English-speaking world. The Russian rhino-breeder already has a remarkable way with the English language, and a gratified sense of his own anachronism, as an Old European too thoroughly educated by life and by books to be shocked by the audacities, whether formal or moral, of Anglo-Saxon Modernism. ‘That sort of thing was much discussed in Russia just before the revolution and in Paris just after the war, and we had a good many writers (most of them clean forgotten at present) doing a roaring trade by depicting the kind of “amoral” life on which you comment in such a delightful way’ – this to his same New York agent, who had seemingly complained on behalf of the market she served that the selling of his work would not be helped by his ‘old-fashioned themes’, an inept description, even for an agent, of the unprecedently sinister plots of Despair and Laughter in the Dark.

Fifteen years later, by now a regular if not universally approved-of professor of literature at Cornell, Nabokov sets off for market with the horniest rhino of them all, Lolita, whose fraught emergence into print makes the central, seismic episode of these Selected Letters. The first mention is in a letter of 1951: a novel in progress ‘deals with the problems of a very moral middle-aged gentleman who falls very immorally in love with his stepdaughter, a girl of 13’, the last is a report from as late as 1976, a year before he died, that he had just been shown ‘an advert in an American rag offering a life-size doll with “French and Greek apertures” (this delphic if guessable expression might have inspired more enterprising editors to an anatomical footnote). When Nabokov most needs them, the big New York publishers are fearful, tiptoeing away from his possibly actionable manuscript one after the other. The novelist himself remains patient and even sympathetic to them, recognising that what he has to sell is a ‘time-bomb’; but he is more than ordinarily anxious to publish what he knows is far and away the best thing he has done since he changed from writing in Russian to writing in English, and in the end he falls into the hands of the ‘ogreish’ Maurice Girodias of the Olympia Press, a publisher whose hands are easier to fall into than out of again and with whom his relations became memorably sour: ‘I wrote Lolita’ are the infuriated last words of the last letter written to Girodias by Nabokov and included here. By now Putnams have brought the book out in the United States, it is selling hugely and its adhesive first publisher is asserting his claim to some of the profit.

Nabokov was no doubt bound to have trouble with Lolita, especially once it had made its offshore debut, as a lovely rhino condemned to snort amidst the alien porn of the Olympia Press. But he has trouble, too, finding a home for wholly unsensational books which it should have been simple for him to get published. How, one asks, could any publisher with a right mind to his business turn down the touching and delectable Pnin, the definitive comedy of campus life, a large part of which had appeared chapter by chapter in the New Yorker? Viking, however, did so, on the grounds, according to Dimitri Nabokov, that to bring it out would be to do his father a ‘disservice’. And the massively glossed, famously literal translation of Eugene Onegin, on which Nabokov spent so much time and which was instrumental in creating the rift with Edmund Wilson, is long years in the hawking around and the publishing, before the Bollingen Foundation finally obliges.

Once Nabokov has been released by Lolita from all further solicitation by him of patrons, editors and publishers, his letters are free to become crankier and more abrupt. He can now pursue a favourite sub-genre, the fierce correction of published error, whether respecting himself or others. In his own case he has to cope with his biographer Andrew Field, his commerce with whom deteriorates swiftly and with cause, from the co-operative to the adversarial, to the point where, by 1973, Nabokov is telling one of his Russian correspondents: ‘His version of my life has turned out to be cretinous. I have had to correct or delete hundreds of passages teeming with blunders and inventions of all kinds.’ He continues also through the nearly twenty years of his fame to ask, as he had done from the start, to have the final say in how his books should look in their bound form. But with what descriptive flair he applies his veto: ‘Dear Frank, I just got the photostat of the new jacket design for ADA, and I do not like it at all. The lettering is dumpy, with apertures en cul-de-poule. The coloration of the word ADA recalls at first blush the nacrine inner layer of a dejected shellfish, and, at a closer inspection, the bleak marblings of a ledger’s edge.’

More keenly than about artwork, however, Nabokov worries about what will happen to his work in translation, to the style of his books, which is also their matter. His first experience, with his Russian novels, has not been good: ‘They belong to Russia and her literature, and not only style but subject undergoes a horrible bleeding and distortion when translated into another tongue.’ To stop such haemorrhaging he chose to translate his Russian novels into English himself, or to oversee his son as he translated them. Then, once his later books are being translated out of English, the same anxiety and possessiveness return. Even in old age he is prepared to spend days on end improving the French version of Ada, in which he has found ‘monstrous mistakes and impossible mannerisms’ (the unhappy Paris publisher responsible bears the superbly apt name of Henri Hell, apt because in the title Ada – pronounced arda – we are meant to see and to hear the Russian word ad, meaning ‘hell’; unless of course Henri Hell is a nom de guerre angrily superimposed on a correspondent of some more innocent name by Nabokov himself). Nabokov has a philosophy of translation, and an unorthodox one: he believes that the best translation, of poetry above all, has to be literal, never free. And as he treats Pushkin, in his declaredly ‘servile’ version of Eugene Onegin, so the translators of his own books are expected to treat him; they should stick as pedantically close as they can to what he writes, and not try and suit it disloyally to the presumed tastes of his foreign readers. When, in 1969, his Poems and Problems are published, Nabokov knows what format is best for the 36 poems in that book, originally written in Russian and translated into English by himself. The originals must face the translations, he tells the publisher: ‘It is for you to decide, but I am quite sure ... that the Cyrillic weirdies ought not to be tucked away, in diamond print, but should be boldly displayed en regard. This is both more scholarly and compendious, since they will take less place in a verso position while satisfying the poignant demands of pedantic purity.’

This last phrase is an alliterative but serious pointer to a genuine passion in Nabokov. If pedantry is a love of exactness in seeing and describing, then pedantry is what most openly moves him, whether in attending to the minute but specific differences in the genitalia of American ‘blue’ butterflies, or in getting students actually to read great works of literature whose factual delights pass unnoticed because of the academic craving for abstraction – this professor sees it as a vital if unpopular part of his lesson on Tolstoy to explain ‘the arrangement of a sleeping-car on the Moscow-Petersburg express train’. And when the circumstances are poignant for being personal, Nabokov displays a more than merely aesthetic pedantry in respect of the historical past, writing in 1967 to correct the Sunday Times in London, which had printed a wrong account of his father’s murder in Berlin: ‘I wish to submit that at a time when, in so many Eastern countries history has become a joke, this precious beam of light upon a precious detail may be of some help to the next investigator.’

These Selected Letters are not so inveterately rude as I have made them seem, by quoting their author only at his most destructively (and quotably) imperious. Nabokov can be supportive too, and charming, with the right correspondent. And when he has Soviet Russia for his subject, and its hateful regime, his imperiousness reveals itself as strong emotion and no longer as a cultivated effrontery. He may scorn the idea that the writer has responsibilities other than to the uninhibited practice of his art, but it is as a celebrated writer, late in life, that he speaks up for those who have fallen foul of the Soviet regime, for Joseph Brodsky or for Solzhenitsyn, writers he could never admire but whom he is ready to support – he even arranges for jeans (or ‘dungarees’, as he puts it) to be sent to Brodsky in Russia. He writes to the Observer in support of the persecuted Bukovsky (‘Although I doubt that any words of mine can elicit the slightest reverberation amidst the unimaginable magistrates of the Soviet Union’), and cables the Leningrad Division of the Union of Writers to protest against the arrest of Vladimir Maramzin. It is the tragic fate of Russia and of Russians which finally relocates the exiled Nabokov in his original, much-cherished culture, by drawing from him sentiments which no other cause could have inspired him to make public.

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John Sturrock, 24 May 1990

Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977

edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Bruccoli.

“... and wrote a memoir of his early life – Conclusive Evidence, later to be called Speak, Memory – he defines it to a potential publisher as a hybrid between unqualified autobiography and a novel, the truth crossed with fiction, his life having been given ‘a definite plot’. Nabokov redrafts the old autobiographical contract in favour of the ...”