**(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.

**Other lrb refs:**

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v12/n10/john-sturrock/rhino-breeder

Rhino-Breeder

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 ...”

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v22/n13/john-lanchester/be-interesting

Be interesting!

John Lanchester: Martin Amis, 6 July 2000

Experience

by Martin Amis.

“... for some reason it is usually a man) sits down to tell the story of his life. Nabokov’s Speak, Memory is in this and other respects an important book, and it also establishes the defining problem of the genre, which is how to give the memoir an artistically gratifying shape while remaining true to the messiness and quotidianness of lived life. It’s a ...”

https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v42/n21/patricia-lockwood/eat-butterflies-with-me

Eat butterflies with me?

Patricia Lockwood, 5 November 2020

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

by Vladimir Nabokov, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy.

“... 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 ...”