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Introduction: Nabokov at 100

Julian W. Connolly

I

In 1966 Vladimir Nabokov responded to an interviewer's comment about his present fame with the remark, "*Lolita* is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure, novelist with an unpronounceable name."[1] Since that time, the reputations of both the novel and the man have increased in stature; it would be unlikely that the writer could make the same claim today. A 1998 poll of the editorial board of the Modern Library (a division of Random House) found *Lolita* in fourth place on a list of the greatest English-language novels of the twentieth century; a second Nabokov novel, *Pale Fire*, was placed fifty-third.[2] Numerous contemporary writers, including John Updike, John Barth, Edward Albee, Edmund White, Donald Harington, David Slavitt, W. G. Sebald, Sasha Sokolov, Yury Trifonov, Vasily Aksenov, and Andrei Bitov have paid homage to Nabokov directly or indirectly in their work. The publication of major editions of Nabokov's work is underway in Germany and France, and Nabokov's English-language novels have been included in the "Library of America" series in the United States. In addition, Nabokov's artistic legacy has become the subject of an enormous and vital critical industry. Brian Boyd's monumental two-volume critical biography (1990–91) reflects a degree of popular interest that has few parallels for Russian-born writers. Articles and monographs on his art are appearing across the globe in a multitude of languages, from Croatian to Japanese, and an electronic discussion group, NABOKV-L, recently listed nearly 500 subscribers from over thirty countries.

The distinctiveness of Nabokov's artistic reputation can be gauged by comparing it with the critical attention paid to some other writers who, like Nabokov, were born in Russia during the 1890s. Though

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several of these writers, from the slightly older Boris Pasternak (1890–1960), Osip Mandelshtam (1891–1938), Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940), Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941), and Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930), to the coeval Yury Olesha (1899–1960), have been the subject of some fine critical treatments, none of them are favored with the kind of ever-broadening attention that Vladimir Nabokov now enjoys. This is a remarkable achievement for an individual who was born into a world of aristocratic privilege in St. Petersburg, forced into emigration by the Bolshevik Revolution, and faced with near destitution for many years during the second quarter of the century.

The crucial turning point in Nabokov's career was his decision to shift from writing in Russian to writing in English in the late 1930s.[3] This shift, which Nabokov claimed was necessitated by the diminishing audience of potential readers in the Russian emigration (see *SO*, 36–37), had the effect of unleashing the writer's already established penchant for linguistic play and stylistic innovation. As Jane Grayson put it, "The brilliance of Nabokov's later English style owes not a little to his viewpoint as a foreigner. He sees the English language through different eyes. He sees patterns of sound and potential meaning in words which the native speaker, his perception dulled through familiarity, would simply pass over."[4] The ultimate consequence of this shift, of course, was the creation of the novel that would bring Nabokov both lasting fame and financial security, *Lolita*.

The publication of *Lolita* (in Paris in 1955, and in the United States in 1958), followed by the release of *Pale Fire* in 1962, triggered the beginning of a sustained critical interest in Nabokov's work that has led to ever more insightful and probing explorations of the unique world created in his fiction. With few exceptions, the early émigré reviews of his work did not probe very deeply into its structure and substance, and the émigré critics often concerned themselves over such questions as the depth of Nabokov's "Russianness."[5] Vladimir Weidle and Vladislav Khodasevich, however, initiated a productive line of inquiry into Nabokov's work when they pointed to the writer's recurring concern with art and the making of art: "The life of the artist and the life of a device in the consciousness of the artist – this is Sirin's theme, revealing itself to some degree or other in almost every one of his writings"[6] Such an approach, which focuses on the aesthetic and metaliterary dimensions of Nabokov's work, also

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became the dominant critical perspective among the early English-language critics who went beyond brief reviews and began a serious examination of the fiction in the mid-1960s. The title of the first monograph in English devoted to Nabokov – Page Stegner's *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1966) – signals the prevailing critical orientation of the day. Eventually, however, a reaction to this view of Nabokov as cool aesthete began to emerge, and several astute critics, led by Robert Alter, began to focus on the writer's engagement with, and not retreat from, life itself.[7] This investigation of the "ethical" Nabokov was soon followed by a new approach – the discovery that the intricate play of patterns in Nabokov's fiction pointed beyond the text to an otherworldly dimension: thus was born the "metaphysical" Nabokov.[8]

The evolving, protean shape that Nabokov's work has assumed in the eyes of readers during the last thirty years testifies to its unusual richness and depth, and to its resistance to facile definition. Indeed, when one considers Nabokov's profile in relation to the modernist tradition in which he developed, one comes to appreciate how distinctive that profile was. This aura of distinction begins with his birth. Unlike most of his literary peers, Nabokov was born into what might be called the "service aristocracy" in Russia: his grandfather had been minister of justice under two tsars, and his father was a noted jurist, a member of the first Russian Duma. We can contrast this family background with that of most of the other figures of Nabokov's generation who would rise to prominence in Russian literature. Pasternak's father was an artist and the director of an art school; Tsvetaeva's and Bulgakov's fathers were professors (as was Alexander Blok's father). Other writers, including Esenin, Mayakovsky, and Olesha came from even more modest origins. Brought up in a cosmopolitan household, Nabokov learned to read in English before he could do so in Russian, and he soon added French to his repertoire;[9] we shall see the enduring impact of this multi-nationalism on his self-image later. Yet like the others mentioned above, Nabokov also belonged to a generation that, as Robert Wohl has put it, was the first to grow up "*within* modernism in a way that no previous generation could have."[10] In a letter to Edmund Wilson he proudly asserted his ties to that era; referring to Russian literature during the period from 1905–1917, he declared: "Blok, Bely, Bunin and others wrote their best stuff in those days. And never was poetry so popular –

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not even in Pushkin's days. I am a product of that period. I was bred in that atmosphere."[11]

Raised at a time when Symbolism reigned supreme, to be followed in quick succession by Acmeism and Futurism, Nabokov, like many of his fellow modernists, was acutely interested in the workings of human consciousness, and in particular, in the way the creative mind attends to and places its unique stamp upon experience and perception. In his interviews and lectures he repeatedly expressed his admiration for Joyce's *Ulysses* and Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, especially their treatment of perception, time, and memory. These two works, along with Bely's *Petersburg* and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, made up Nabokov's own list of the best works of the twentieth century (see *SO*, 57).

Yet perhaps because of his profound involvement in a very different type of intellectual pursuit – lepidoptery (and specifically, the classification of butterflies and moths) – Nabokov did not share of the anti-scientific bias of some of his peers, and he laid special emphasis on a particular approach to the representation of experience. Highly impatient with vague, impressionistic evocations of consciousness,[12] he stressed above all an attention to *detail*, to the smallest, most minute attributes of a given phenomenon. "In high art and pure science detail is everything," he declared; "Only myopia condones the blurry generalizations of ignorance" (*SO*, 168; see also *SO*, 7). This, of course, was a principle he followed in his teaching as well: "In my classes, readers had to discuss specific details, not general ideas" (*SO*, 128); a former student recalls him saying "Caress the details . . . the divine details."[13] Thus, while he was deeply interested in the way the individual consciousness perceives and transforms experience, he remained devoted to the belief that a central concern of this consciousness should include concrete, sensual experience itself – textures, smells, fine gradations of color.

Like Virginia Woolf, Nabokov sharply criticized a writer's readiness to settle for vague platitudes, lifeless descriptions, or bland clichés.[14] He constantly strove to find fresh ways of describing the world and its experiences, and he deployed a dazzling array of devices to achieve this effect. These include the personification of inanimate objects, unexpected combinations of concrete detail and abstract concepts, the depiction of phenomena from striking angles of perception, surprising metaphors, and even phrases in which

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words appear at first glance to be linked by sound more than sense (though closer scrutiny always discloses an inner-bond). Despite his appreciation for unusual perspectives and bold detail, however, he was representative of what might be called the anti-avant-garde wing of European modernism, and rejected much of the work of the avant-garde. His comments on Russian art are indicative: "I prefer the experimental decade that coincided with my boyhood – Somov, Benois . . . Vrubel, Dobuzhinski, etc. Malevich and Kandinsky mean nothing to me and I have always found Chagall's stuff intolerably primitive and grotesque" (*SO*, 170). Nabokov welcomed art that presented a new way of seeing life, but he had little interest in art that veered off into abstraction or deformed the world beyond any hope of recognition or reconstitution. As Ellen Pifer has noted, the function of art and artifice in Nabokov's own work was not to "*oppose*" life but rather "to *renew* the reader's perception of reality – by estranging that perception from habitual formulations."[15]

Nabokov's aversion to the avant-garde also showed up in his views on modern poetry. For example, among the Russian poets, he preferred Ivan Bunin, Vladislav Khodasevich, and the early Blok to the Blok of "The Twelve" and the work of the Futurists; his tastes here were not unusual within the Russian émigré community. Attending Cambridge during the very years that Pound and Eliot were forging new paths in Anglo-American poetry, Nabokov recalls his fondness for the "Georgians," and specifically Rupert Brooke (see *SM*, 266, 268 [Ch. 13]). His lack of interest in Eliot or Pound (and his outright hostility toward them in later years)[16] is noteworthy, but it may have been inspired by a number of factors. For one thing, at the very heart of Nabokov's view of life was an undiluted appreciation for the notion of the individual and the particular. He could never have written, as Eliot once did in connection with his editorial work on *The Criterion*: "I am not an individual but an instrument."[17] More important in terms of art, Nabokov viewed with disfavor any attempt to use what Eliot termed "the mythical method" as an organizing principle in writing. Eliot introduced the term in an article on Joyce's *Ulysses*,[18] and it suggests the type of approach Nabokov had in mind when he declared that "*Ulysses* . . . is a divine work of art and will live on despite the academic nonentities who turn it into a collection of symbols or Greek myths" (*SO*, 55).[19]

He was also profoundly suspicious of the tendency of some modernist figures to espouse a socio-political agenda in their writ-

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ings: "I never could admit that a writer's job was to improve the morals of his country, and point out lofty ideas from the tremendous height of a soapbox, and administer first aid by dashing off second-rate books."[20] Having witnessed first-hand the havoc wreaked on Russia by the Communists, and the rising ugliness of Fascism in Hitler's Germany, he felt a special antipathy toward those who endorsed either Fascism or Communism, an activity that a fair number of European modernists engaged in, including Pound, Céline, Wyndham Lewis, Eliot, and Malraux (though not Forster, noted for his liberal humanism, or Woolf, known for her anti-militarism). What is more, Nabokov was particularly aware of the degree to which demands for political tendentiousness had crippled Russian literature in the Soviet Union from the late 1920s on, and he deplored the heavy-handed imposition of political ideology on literary creation: "I have despised ideological coercion instinctively all my life" (*SO*, 64).[21] Again and again, he would return to the simple formula: "there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art" (*SO*, 33). In brief, he was less interested in reforming the present world than in refining the worlds created in his art.[22]

Nabokov's aversion to the pursuit of political goals in art had even deeper roots. Throughout his life, he tried to discourage attempts to identify him with any larger, communal group, whether it be a social class, a generational category (including such entities as Wohl's "generation of 1914" discussed above), or even nationality. So, in addition to declaring "I have never belonged to any club or group. No creed or school has had any influence on me whatsoever" (*SO*, 3), he could answer an interviewer's question about national identity by saying: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany" (*SO*, 26).[23] Again, his stress is on individual talent, not national origin: "I have always maintained . . . that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance . . . The writer's art is his real passport" (*SO*, 63).

Such a stance not only accorded well with Nabokov's insistence on appreciating the individual over the general, it also had a second, perhaps more pervasive significance. Nabokov once stated that he felt an affinity for the "type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish" (*SO*, 117). Having been forced from his homeland, and

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having witnessed the untimely loss of cherished friends and family members over the years, Nabokov placed great store in self-reliance, and in the maintenance of a singular, ever-renewing, personal sense of self. Having created this specific self-image, he might have felt less vulnerable to the inevitable depredations of time and contingency. In Jessica Feldman's formulation, exile offered Nabokov a clear choice: "purposeful self-creation or defeat by external events."[24] At times, Nabokov's seeming aloofness struck outside observers as snobbery, but closer inspection suggests that his detachment was more of a protective device than an expression of disdain for the general public.

Nabokov's response to the question of national identity has additional implications. It serves as a reminder that those who would seek to delineate Nabokov's position within literary modernism[25] need to be aware of a number of contexts – Russian, Anglo-American, French, and yes, even German. Nabokov's art presents an intriguing blend of literary perspectives and echoes. Multilingual and multilayered, his fiction draws upon an immense variety of sources from the literature of the past and from literature of his day (including Russian, French, German, British, and American literature, both high-brow and mass-market). Nabokov's readers and scholars alike face significant challenges in their quest to understand the full range of Nabokov's creative imagination.

II

The present collection, prepared in anticipation of the centenary of Nabokov's birth, attempts to make its own contribution to this endeavor. The eleven essayists whose work is represented here were asked to move beyond the existing body of work on Nabokov and to offer a fresh appraisal of his artistic legacy. The resulting work falls broadly into two categories. Several of the essays delve into Nabokov's central artistic strategies and comment on the reflection of his personal experience in his art, while others explore the relationship of Nabokov's work to the literary and cultural traditions in which it was generated.

One of Nabokov's more famous declarations has to do with his sense of control over the created world: "every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth"

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(*SO*, 69). A number of the essays in this volume investigate the specific ways in which the author attempts to manifest such control. Gavriel Shapiro's essay opens this line of inquiry by offering a close examination of Nabokov's remarkable penchant for elaborate forms of auto-allusion or self-reference. After acknowledging Nabokov's familiar device of encoding his name anagramatically in his work, Shapiro shows that the writer utilized a wide-range of techniques not only to refer to himself, but also to pay coded homage to those he admired and loved. Turning to Nabokov's autobiographical writings, Galya Diment investigates the subtle interplay of remembrance and invention in the telling of one's story. In contrast to Proust, who valorized the workings of involuntary memory, Nabokov highlighted the considerable role of the creative imagination in the recovery of details from the past. Diment's essay underscores the degree to which the writer's stress on the role of imagination in memory may point to an under-appreciated element of the autobiographical genre itself. Maurice Couturier interrogates Nabokov's work from a different angle. Squarely addressing the issue of authorial control in the novel *Pale Fire*, Couturier finds that there is a reservoir of implication that eludes the author's attempt at control. In an intriguing series of analyses he argues that an interpretive strategy which investigates the text in terms of "desire" permits access to this reservoir and discloses meaning that the author may wish to suppress or evade.

Other contributors to this volume are interested in refining our understanding of basic ethical principles conveyed in Nabokov's work. Maxim Shrayer tackles the difficult question of what specific role Nabokov's life-long acquaintance with Russian Jews had on his work, and he indicates that the effects were both palpable and far-reaching. Leona Toker looks at the seminal importance of individualism in Nabokov's work, but she approaches it from a new tack. She probes the consequences of an individual's contact with the crowd, and she examines the promises and pitfalls of one's involvement with another, even if the other is a lover. Finally, in an essay with extensive implications, Gennady Barabtarlo examines the very foundation of Nabokov's art, and he uncovers in an early Nabokov piece, *The Tragedy of Mr. Morn*, the core elements of an artistic philosophy that Barabtarlo believes runs throughout the fiction. His analysis of two interlinked trinities – space, time, matter; imagination, memory, love – ends with a call for a reconsideration of Nabokov's entire oeuvre.

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The essays devoted to Nabokov's relationship to the literary and cultural traditions in which he wrote provide just a small indication of the breadth of his interests as a writer and critic. Although the early émigré critics argued that Sirin's work lay outside the Russian tradition, subsequent research by such figures as Simon Karlinsky, G. M. Hyde, Vladimir Alexandrov, and others have tried to show how Nabokov's work emerges from the heritage of Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Bunin, and the writers of the Russian Silver Age.[26] Here, I too deal with Nabokov's relationship to the Russian literary tradition, this time attempting to sort out the contentious issue of Nabokov's attitude toward Fedor Dostoevsky's work and reputation. Also in this volume are two articles that explore connections between Nabokov's work and English literature. Taking issue with the notion that Nabokov felt an entrenched dislike for literature by women, Ellen Pifer uncovers intriguing links between *Lolita* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. D. Barton Johnson considers Nabokov's years at Cambridge, and he examines the effect that Nabokov's interest in Rupert Brooke may have had on the subsequent evolution of his work. Passing beyond the borders of fiction proper, John Burt Foster, Jr., investigates the ways in which Nabokov's modest position as a critic of culture resonates and contrasts with that of other contemporary European thinkers such as Adorno and Malraux. Alexander Dolinin also contemplates Nabokov's European experience, and he demonstrates how staunchly opposed the individualist writer was to the determinist historical theories of many of his contemporaries. Although Nabokov expressed scorn for didactic literature, his own writings reveal him to be a pointed critic of contemporary culture and thought.

These essays, along with the intense flurry of international activities honoring Nabokov during this centennial year, testify to the writer's vibrant legacy. In the memorable opening lines of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov wrote that "common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (*SM*, 19). He went on to assert the he "rebel[s] against this state of affairs" (20). While his physical presence may be gone, his life's work continues to cast bright beams throughout the reading world. This work, and the extraordinary individual who created it, will continue to attract the attention of devoted readers for generations to come.

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NOTES

1 Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (1973; New York: Vintage International, 1990), 107. (Hereafter *SO*.)
2 In the original poll, *Lolita* tied for first place with *Ulysses*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Brave New World*. When the members of the editorial board were asked to rank the five novels, *Lolita* finished in fourth place.
3 After translating his novel *Otchaianie* into *Despair* in 1935 and *Kamera obscura* into *Laughter in the Dark* in 1937, Nabokov felt confident enough to write *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in English from December 1938 through January 1939.
4 Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 216.
5 For a discussion of the émigré response to Sirin's work, see Ludmila A. Foster, "Nabokov in Russian Emigré Criticism" in *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1974), 42–54. A brief survey of émigré criticism that complements Foster's study is Marina T. Naumann's article, "Nabokov as Viewed by Fellow Emigrés," *Russian Language Journal* 28, no. 99 (1974): 18–26. Ironically, a similar debate about Nabokov's "Russianness" broke out in the late 1980s in the Soviet Union when the conditions of *glasnost'* made it possible for Nabokov's work to be published there. See Aleksei Zverev, "Literary Return to Russia" in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York and London: Garland, 1995), 291–305.
6 Vladislav Khodasevich, "On Sirin," trans. Michael H. Walker, ed. Simon Karlinsky and Robert P. Hughes, *TriQuarterly* 17 (1970): 96–101; reprinted in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr., and Charles Newman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971); also reprinted in *Nabokov: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Norman Page (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982). Just the year before, in a review of Nabokov's work, Weidle had voiced a similar view: "The theme of Sirin's art is art itself – this is the first thing one must say about him;" see "Vladimir Weidle on Sirin," in *The Complection of Russian Literature*, compiled by Andrew Field (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 239.
7 Alter's reading of the novel *Invitation to a Beheading* for a special issue of the journal *TriQuarterly* disclosed Nabokov's crucial point: "that it is life rather than art alone that is inexhaustible, and that art's ability to renew itself, to be infinitely various and captivating, finally depends on its necessary inadequacy in the face of the inexhaustible enigma of conscious life." See Robert Alter, "*Invitation to a Beheading*: Nabokov and the Art of Politics," *TriQuarterly* 17 (1970): 57; reprinted in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, ed. Appel, Jr., and Newman, 57; and in *Nabokov's* Invitation to a Beheading*: A Critical*

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