# VLADIMIR NABOKOV:
# SELECTED LETTERS 1940-1977

Edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/582 pp. $29.95

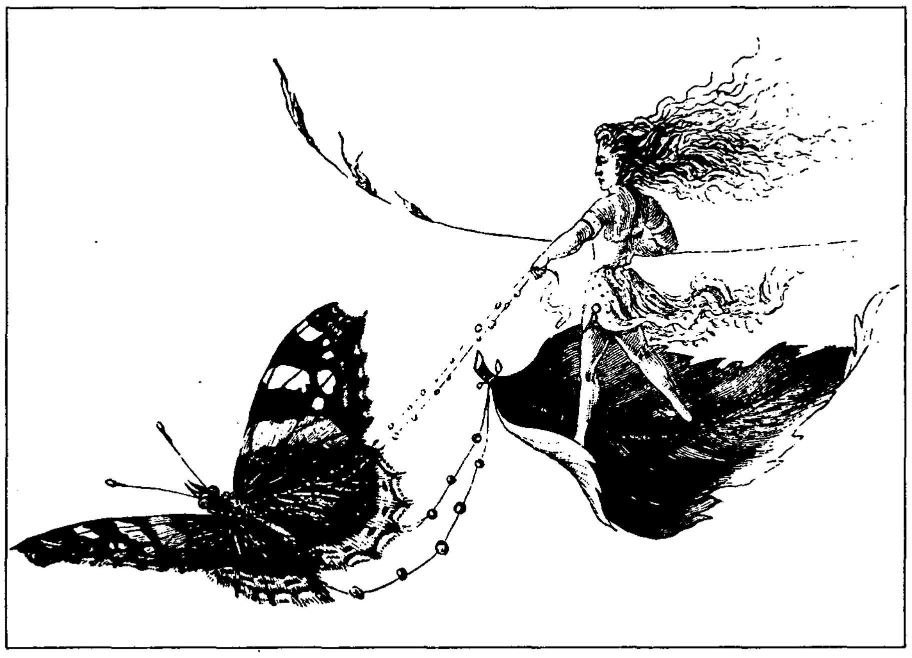
Charles Nicol

The first things one notices about this collection of letters are that the selection and editing are very much a family affair and that it starts not in 1940 but in 1923, maintaining that mild eccentricity often associated with items Nabokovian. Dmitri, who has continued to translate his father's early Russian (and French) works into English (and Italian), and Vera, who handled much of her husband's (English, Russian, French) typing and correspondence, have both contributed substantially. Among the many footnotes supplied by the family, a few "of a personal nature" are signed or initialed; in addition to personal glimpses, these sometimes set up defenses against snipers or supply additional—everything Nabokov wrote has wonderful comic moments—humor, such as the following comment about Nabokov's first American literary agent: "De Jannelli gave little Dmitri Nabokov his first camera, a Kodak Baby Brownie. DN" (which has the tone of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich calling himself "little Vanya"). Rachmaninoff gave Dmitri his first radio; much later his father gave him some good prophylactic advice: "In Italy, for his own good, /A wolf must wear a Riding Hood." The last letter in this collection (9 May 1977) is also to Dmitri.

Many of Nabokov's novels are crafted so that a revelation on the last few pages—sometimes even in the last sentence—throws new light on the whole affair, compelling the reader to start over again, now with the pages illuminated by 500 watts instead of a dim bulb. This collection of letters almost has to be read the same way, and its last few pages help explain the dozen pre-1940 (pre-American) letters that constitute its beginning. Thus young Vladimir's first letter, written during a summer of farm labor in the south of France, starts with a two-word salutation to his mother and an annotation. This endearing letter contains a touch of synesthesia ("I took a walk around the plantation, behind the grove of cork oaks, ate peaches and apricots, admired the sunset, listened to a nightingale's twees and whistles, and both its song and the sunset tasted of apricot and peach"), but the Russian facsimile and the English translation are really here to refute one of the wilder claims of Nabokov's first biographer, Andrew Field, that Nabokov addressed his mother Elena Ivanovna by the unlikely diminutive "Lolita." We return to this matter only 500 pages later, in Nabokov's towering reply to Field's "ignoble letter of July 9, 1973" and Dmitri's footnote referring the reader to his own devastating review "Did He Really Call His Mum Lolita?" of Field's biography (*Spectator*-savers may be able to content themselves with mine of January 1987). Later still, Vladimir noted that "I am still at war with Field, who turned out to be a rat."

Four of the early letters are to his wife, and the first footnote to them is one of the few signed with her name: "When my husband was absent from home he wrote me every day. I have suggested four letters from those I received from him in 1937 during our longest 'separation.' Vera Nabokov." Those quotes around *separation* seem to indicate that these vigorous husbandly love-letters are squelching another rumor, this time one originating either in Field's opus or in a gossipy book by Zinaida Shchakovskaya, a Parisian Russian acquaintance not in the index. Still, an unsigned footnote here to "all the Irinas in the world" intriguingly identifies them as "various ladies by that name who flirted with or had designs on VN." Another of these letters to Vera contains the darkest mood of the whole collection, concerning Vladimir's—VN's—radiation treatments for psoriasis: "You know—now I can tell you frankly—the indescribable torments I endured in February, before these treatments, drove me to the border of suicide—a border I was not authorized to cross because I had you in my baggage." (Vladimir and John Updike—our most famous current psoriatic—considerably admired each other's works. Was there a kind of dermal sympathy? No wonder VN was especially fond of *The Centaur.*)

In general, this collection seems to contain too many letters to editors and publishers, especially in regard to *Lolita*; VN's increasingly desperate search for a publisher doubtless needs documentation, as does the struggle for rights with its slime-slippery first publisher, but we seem to have more an exhaustion than a selection, and the dozen pages devoted to three lists of proof corrections are surely of interest only to the extremely dedicated Nabokovian. Perhaps stalwart, formidable Dmitri, who tends to overwhelm his father's critics, has been overzealous: Would VN himself have included all this material? After all, nobody doubts his extreme care for his texts, and this is certainly made clear again in his explanations to Katharine A. White of the *New Yorker* of minute details in shorter works: "Low boy file *is* the right term. See Beckley-Cardy's (Chicago) School Buyer's Guide of Furniture-Supplies-Equipment, Catalog No. 96, School year 1953-1954. Administrator's edition, p. 17, No. D 250, 'all-in-one lowboy file,' illustr." He even gave thorough instructions ("I am sending you some photographs of Pnin-like Russians, with and without hair, for a visual appreciation of the items I am going to discuss") for Milton Glaser's extraordinary portrait on the dust jacket of *Pnin*. Most of these letters to editors contain items of considerable interest, such as evaluations of his own works, or comedy, such as the handwritten ending of a short note to White: "This is the *first* letter I have typed out myself in my life. Took me 28 minutes but came out beautifully." Better yet, one tries to imagine the reaction of James Laughlin (editor and proprietor of New Directions) upon, after VN's butterfly-collecting visit, receiving a letter asking him to collect two types of plants from areas designated on an enclosed map, plus a few ants: "Kill the ants with alcohol or carbona or any other stuff handy (just drown them, do not squash) and put them into a small box with cotton wool."



Then there are the projects that fell through during his leaner years in America, including a revised, annotated *Anna Karenin* (as VN would have it) and, amazingly enough, a proposed translation of *The Brothers Karamazov*. And it's too bad that the article *Life* proposed on his butterfly-collecting was dropped: "I take it for granted that your photographer is prepared to do some crawling and wriggling and to ignore completely the possible presence of snakes." He even submitted a Burma Shave jingle.

Occasionally his strong opinions give a salutary jolt, as in his 1945 letter to a local Reverend, refusing to let Dmitri participate in a clothing drive for German children: "When I have to choose between giving for a Greek, Czech, French, Belgian, Chinese, Norwegian, Russian, Jewish or German child, I shall not choose the latter one." His absolute rejection of Nazi and Soviet totalitarian regimes was based on a lifetime of painful experience, but sometimes went to surprising lengths, as when he abruptly cancelled a planned collaboration with fellow émigré and well-known linguist Roman Jakobson, presumably ending their acquaintance as well: "Frankly, I am unable to stomach your little trips to totalitarian countries, even if these trips are prompted merely by scientific considerations." We should also remember his dismissals of quite a few famous writers, as in his accepting an invitation from the *New York Times Book Review* in 1949 to "do an occasional review. I have been waiting for a long time to take a crack at such big fakes as Mr. T. S. Eliot and Mr. Thomas Mann." (He took on Jean-Paul Sartre instead.)

Fame brought its own problems: autograph hounds, interviewers, biographers, scholars. He had to keep refusing honorary degrees. Occasionally his renown could be used to advantage:

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although he refused to join a committee to support a Soviet writer incarcerated in a mental hospital, he sent a telegram of protest to Leningrad; the writer, Vladimir Maramzin, was allowed to emigrate soon afterward. Similarly, VN privately considered Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn a heroic figure but "not . . . a great writer," and was distressed when casual remarks to this effect were made public. When Solzhenitsyn was allowed to emigrate, VN turned down a public proposal from the *New York Times Magazine* ("he regrets he cannot write a 'letter to Solzhenitsyn' "); privately he had already written just such a letter of welcome. He sent a get-well telegram to Lyndon Johnson after the President's surgery. But as might be expected, he kept up his scientific correspondence with lepidopteral colleagues.

These are delightful letters. All that they lack is the kind of intense intellectual debate found in the *Nabokov/Wilson Letters*; VN doesn't seem to have found a correspondent to replace his old friend. This collection does reprint Nabokov's side of later public exchanges and one last comment included with his refusal to contribute to a volume of essays on Wilson (the letter is signed by Vera): "Psychologically it would be very difficult for VN to ignore in a biographic paper the Pushkin controversy which revealed not only ignorance of Russian on EW's part, but also a bizarre animosity that he appears to have been nursing since the late nineteen-fifties." Perhaps Nabokov's correspondence with fellow émigrés has more intellectual echoes of the Wilson letters; a collection from the earlier European years is promised. □

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## STRAIGHT SHOOTING: WHAT'S WRONG WITH AMERICA AND HOW TO FIX IT

John Silber/Harper & Row/336 pp. $22.50

William H. Nolte

John Silber should never have allowed his publisher (I assume the blame should be placed there since publishers are notorious for their lack of probity when it comes to merchandizing their wares) to use as subtitle to *Straight Shooting* such an inanity as "What's Wrong With America and How to Fix It." It's hard to imagine that Silber, a man of wide learning, a trained logician who respects the language and has an abiding interest in distinguishing between fact and error, between the obviously untrue and what the rational mind perceives as truth—in short, not a man readily susceptible to buncombe of any sort—should have permitted, without protest, such an outrageously inflated claim to be printed on the dust-jacket and title-page of what is in fact a pretty good book. By no means a great book, not the sort to make the judicious sing hallelujah or shout eureka, but a tome that has its moments, that steers a steady course, that does a good deal more than mouth the current platitudes (though it has a few of those, too) about the various and sundry ailments afflicting the body and soul of the Republic—or of what was once a republic before going down the inevitable road to empire. But I am too besotted with qualifications, with a schoolmarmish demand, if you will, for precision. Suffice it to say that *Straight Shooting* falls far, far short of fulfilling the promise of that humorless subtitle.

And while on the clef note of humor (or the humorless), it seems to me apparent that only a humorist—someone with the bitter insight of a Swift, an Ambrose Bierce, or a Mark Twain, or the gargantuan waggery and iconoclasm of a Mencken—is capable of providing a just appraisal of the Great American Follies, of what one of our greatest poets referred to half a century ago as "the immense vulgarities of misapplied science and decaying Christianity" (but then Jeffers was describing Western civilization in general and not just America). In a memorable poem, "Shine, Perishing Republic," written in the 1920s, Jeffers described an America settling "in the mould of its vulgarity, heavily thickening to empire . . ." Unlike the vast majority of the condemners of our second-rateness in that decade, much like the one now swirling to a close, Mencken reveled in what he revealed, adamantly refusing to allow bad news or his shabby surroundings to disturb his peace of mind. He began his famous essay "On Being an American" (1922) by explaining why he remained at home when so many of his compatriots were fleeing the shambles for fairer lands, intent on throwing off the curse forever. Quite simply, he remained "on the dock, wrapped in the flag, when the Young Intellectuals set sail" since only here could the conditions for his happiness be so fully met. And to be happy, he noted (reducing the thing to its elementals), he had to be:

> a. Well-fed, unhounded by sordid cares, at ease in Zion.
> b. Full of a comfortable feeling of superiority to the masses of my fellow-men.
> c. Delicately and unceasingly amused according to my taste.

With those conditions in place, he readily (and logically) concluded that it would be impossible for a man of his "general weaknesses, vanities, appetites, prejudices, and aversions" to live in These States and *not* be happy. His delirious indictment of that delirious time needs hardly the change of a word to suit our own generation of swine, to borrow Hunter Thompson's apt phrase. Then, neatly in place, follow the three "conditions," fleshed out in a rhetoric that, after all these years, still delights me:

> Here the business of getting a living, particularly since the war brought the loot of all Europe to the national strong-box, is enormously easier than it is in any other Christian land—so easy, in fact, that an educated and forehanded man who fails at it must actually make deliberate efforts to that end. Here the general average of intelligence, of knowledge, of competence, of integrity, of self-respect, of honor is so low that any man who knows his trade, does not fear ghosts, has read fifty good books, and practices the common decencies stands out as brilliantly as a wart on a bald head, and is thrown willy-nilly into a meager and exclusive aristocracy. And here, more than anywhere else that I know of or have heard of, the daily panorama of human existence, of private and communal folly—the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries, and extravagances—is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amperage, so steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and originality, that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to awake every morning with all the eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school superintendent touring the Paris peep-shows.

After then pausing to admit that "a certain sough of rhetoric may be here," Mencken went on to examine the present and recent past of his beloved homeland with a wit and wisdom seldom approached by an American of his time. Other writers of the period around the First World War were equally harsh and even more gloomy in their assessment not only of America but of Western civilization, which was depicted by Oswald Spengler, among others, as already far gone in its decline. Who could ever forget the notion, expressed in that period, that America might well be the first powerful nation in history to move from barbarism to degeneration without the usual interval of civilization? In the work of Henry and Brooks Adams there was gloomy prophecy—and some very bad guesses as to specifics. In the preface to his *Character and Opinion in the United States* (1921), George Santayana said serenely what others tended to say in anger and dismay: "Civilization is perhaps approaching one of those long winters that overtake it from time to time. A flood of barbarism from below may soon level all the fair works of our Christian ancestors, as another flood two thousand years ago leveled those of the ancients. Romantic Christendom—picturesque, passionate, unhappy episode—may be coming to an end." But such a catastrophe, he added, was no reason for despair, given the fact that "even if the world lost its memory it could not lose its youth."

Moving forward half a century to *The Passing of the Modern Age* (1970), John Lukacs, a Hungarian-born historian, described the spirit of the age in a way that now seems almost fashionable:

> By the middle of the 1960s most people of the Western World, even in America, felt the prevalence of despair. This was a new experience for civilized mankind, especially for Americans. In Europe there reigned cynicism and calculation, something that to many people of the Old World was at least not entirely unfamiliar. Americans were beset by the fatal flaw of their mental habits, their tendency to state human problems wrongly. They were preoccupied with the persistence of violence whereas their problem was the re-emergence of savagery. It seemed that this once Indian land may have left a curse on its conquerors. In more and more places American civilization was succumbing to the temptations of a motorized and drugged witches' sabbath, at the edges of which reappeared the impassive savage ghost of the Indian.
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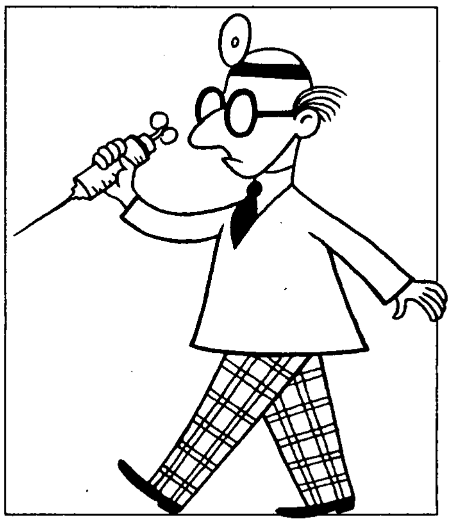
> In any event, the old things and beliefs were now beginning to go very fast. In many ways the end of the Modern Age, of the



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