

There are other instances where Makowsky is on target. Yet, for the reader, the harvest is taxing, the yield hardly worth the effort.

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Epistles From the Master

by David R. Slavitt

Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters 1940-1977

Edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli

New York and San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 582 pp., \$29.95

What an inspiring book this is! Even though the trials of the literary life are notorious and banal, there are few of us who are sufficiently hardened to the blows that we don't at least on occasion allow our guard to fall and make the mistake of taking the kicks and pricks personally. Old pro or young tyro, we are all of us susceptible to the whine of sanity and reason, supposing that, at least on occasion, it may be that we are wrong and the world is right, that the combined judgment of all those editors, publishers, reviewers, and professors must have some substance to it.

At those times of trial and uncertainty, we may in the future turn to Nabokov's letters, in this handsomely produced volume—not just on the bookshelf but close at hand, where we can take courage and comfort from the genial master, all silk on the surface but steel underneath, as he so suavely resists the invincible ignorance of Viking; Farrar, Straus; Holt; Doubleday; Harper's; *The New Yorker*; *The Atlantic*; *The New York Times Book Review*; and all the other hacks, timeservers, buffoons, churls, dimwits, dolts, dullards, and dummies whose absurd destiny and only purpose seems to be to annoy their betters.

He is never ruffled, because these vermin just aren't worth it, but an attentive reader can catch at least a suggestion of his exasperation when he explains patiently to Katherine White, wife of E.B. and, for a time, the fiction

editor of *The New Yorker*, that she can't mess with his copy with the same insouciance that publication showed most of the peons on the old finca. Toward the end of a long list of comments on Ms. White's editorial tinkering with one of his *Pnin* stories, Nabokov icily suggests, "34. This insertion is impossible. Nothing should be added here. I worked for a month on this passage."

Large and small, early and late, Nabokov had to deal with these *bêtises*, and he did so, gently but firmly, never for a moment forgetting who he was (a great writer) and who they were (for the most part, justifiably underpaid tradesmen obviously out of their depth).

It is impressive to note how a distinguished editor (like the late Pascal Covici) at a distinguished house (Viking, then an independent publisher) could be so wrongheaded as to reject *Pnin*, that most charming and least challenging of Nabokov's novels. On aesthetic grounds? Or commercial? Either judgment today seems stupid, but Nabokov knew it was even then and, with a perfect certainty and faith, understood that he might as well have been dealing with members of another species. Similarly, at Doubleday, which published *Pnin* and *Nabokov's Dozen*, editor Jason Epstein and editor-in-chief Ken McCormick not only couldn't get the house to do *Lolita*, they couldn't even get Douglas Black, the president of the company, to read the manuscript.

To *The New York Times Book Review*, which had commissioned a review of Sartre's *La Nausée*, he suggests an obvious truth: "May I add that if you could pay me more for this kind of work, I would be able to devote more time to it," and then, once the work is done, he writes to chide them: "This is the first time in my life that something written by me has been pruned by others without my consent. When you asked me to write the article, the very first thing I did was to draw your attention to the fact that I would have to be consulted before any cuts were made. This was a condition—otherwise I would not have written the article at all. . . . [It] is all hopelessly botched and butchered and in gaping discord with my signature. I repeat that never before has any publication

acted with such utter *sans-gêne* towards me."

Throughout all these trials by idiocy, Nabokov remains relatively unruffled and, in the best sense, gentlemanly. It is a rare moment when he allows his exasperation to show through—as he did with Edward Weeks, editor of the *Atlantic*, to whom he wrote in October of 1948: "I have received your letter of September 30 and can only excuse its contents by assuming that you were in your cups when you wrote it. . . . Your letter is so silly and rude that I do not think I want to have anything to do with you or the *Atlantic* any more."

Nabokov was not perfect. Nobody is. Some of his opinions about art and literature, which he expressed in *Strong Opinions* (1973) but which naturally appear here in the letters, were eccentric and wrong—he certainly undervalued Faulkner and T.S. Eliot, for instance. But Nabokov was a creative writer, not a critic, and if his enthusiasms and dislikes require any justification, the wide shelf of his novels, stories, translations, and poems is more than sufficient. Indeed, it is the unquestionably high level of that achievement that gives this volume its particularly therapeutic value for young writers—or writers of any age who, at some moment or other of their lives, happen to be beaten down by the willfully shortsighted stupidity and cupidity of the middlemen of the arts. To read these letters and see how Nabokov got his share of the nonsense, and to realize how little he let it get to him, is to be cleansed and strengthened. He redirects our attention from the ephemeral annoyances to the lasting values that lured us to the arts in the first place.

L'affaire Lolita was a particularly severe series of trials. Nabokov may have been somewhat naïf when he wrote to Maurice Girodias of Olympia Press (of all people!): "You and I know that *Lolita* is a serious book with a serious purpose. I hope the public will accept it as such. A *succès de scandale* would distress me." There was such a *scandale*, not so much because of the book as because of the curious character of that moment in American cultural history. It is my own theory that the relaxation of movie standards that came about through the rating system (and the motion picture pro-

ducers' struggle to stay in business in spite of the challenges of television) rather incidentally changed the ecology for books, for which, automatically, there was a literacy test to limit their audience. A decade later, and the to-do about *Lolita* would hardly have been noticeable. Nabokov was amused by it, only mildly distressed, and always wonderfully balanced.

I remember going up to Ithaca in 1958 to interview him for *Newsweek*,

the terms of my assignment being to determine whether either town or gown now thought of him—to use my editor's words—as “a dirty old man who played with himself in the shower.” What Nabokov told me, and what he wrote shortly thereafter to Walter Minton, the president of Putnam's, the book's publisher, was that “the university's attitude toward the *Lolita* matter has been above reproach.” On the other hand, during the Halloween

trick-or-treating the week before our interview, Nabokov said that a young girl had appeared at his doorstep dressed in tennis whites and wearing a sign around her neck that proclaimed her identity as “Lolita.” He shook his head and explained, “And I don't think they knew I was the author of the book. Frankly, I was shocked.”

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REVISIONS



DOWN THE UP STAIRCASE

H.L. Mencken said that there is really only one economic law worth worrying about, that what goes up must come down, and *vice versa*. This, in essence, is the thesis of Bill Emmott's *The Sun Also Sets: The Limits to Japan's Economic Power* (New York: Times Books/Random House; 292 pp., \$19.95), a timely book written in a style that owes nothing to Hemingway and still less, if that were possible, to Ecclesiastes.

Mr. Emmott—who spent three years as Tokyo bureau chief for *The Economist* and is presently working in London as the business affairs editor of that publication—in his penultimate chapter does, however, recapitulate his argument with an admirable brevity that bears quoting. Against all who predict that Japan is the coming world power, garishly illuminated by a rising sun that is destined at the same time to throw both the United States and the Western European countries into shadow, Emmott argues that:

“[T]he metaphor of the ever-rising sun, does not really work. Suns do not just rise. They also set. That is the new era in Japan, the era of the setting sun. It was already under way in the mid-1980s, even as Japan's exports of capital were prompting speculation and concern about the emergence of Japanese power. The factors that characterized Japan's rise have changed, under the influence of the rise itself: that is, of affluence, international exposure, the

capital surplus, and the now-strong yen. Japan is becoming a nation of consumers, of pleasure-seekers, of importers, of investors and of speculators. Abundant money and free financial markets risk turning this new nation of speculators into one of boom and bust. More certainly, time and the maturing of the baby-boom generation will make Japan a nation of pensioners.

“What this means economically is that Japan's trade and current-account surpluses will disappear, not forever necessarily, but for a significant period. With them will go Japan's role as an exporter of capital. . . . Moreover, if the capital surplus does continue only for these few years, then Japan's candidacy as a top power would have to be consigned to the dustbin of history, along with that of the oil producers of OPEC, whose 1970 surpluses lasted for less than a decade.”

There is a sense in which this talk of which nation is to be—or is to be regarded as—the Number One Power belongs not just to the realm of the speculative but even to that of the unreal, and Bill Emmott is plainly aware of it. Ultimately, of course, we are dealing with questions of relation and relativity, so that, “Only if America fails to lead will Japan have to initiate; only if Japan becomes more powerful than America will Japan really begin to set its own international agenda. The story of Japan's sunrise and its eventual sunset is really a tale of two countries, of Japan and of America.”

Like the serendipitous forces that have converged to produce the so-called economic miracle of Japan, those others that have combined to create America's contemporary economic malaise need not, as Emmott reminds us, prove to be either lasting or determinant ones. Decades of inflationary democracy, compounded by the well-meaning but frequently ill-advised economic policies of the Reagan administration, have resulted in an American economy whose undeniable strengths are underlain by systemic weaknesses; according to Emmott, “This remedying of macroeconomics errors is the basic task facing the United States.” So far, so good; beyond this point, it should come as no surprise that, for the editor of a magazine founded originally to uphold the principles of Free Trade, “The greatest worry after the Reagan era is that the United States could turn protectionist”—that, “In particular, America [could close] its borders to trade, investment, and immigration.”

Given the source of this heartfelt opinion, it is probably futile to argue with its wisdom, beyond observing that a) the United States is unlikely to “close” its borders against anything, including cocaine from Columbia, and b) there is always the possibility that the sort of (relatively minor) economic inefficiencies that Bill Emmott believes protectionist policies always cause might be more than compensated for by domestic felicities lying well beyond the purview of the dismal science. (CW)