

I'd never have the biceps of the brute, or possess the shark's incisive honesty, and my genes had guaranteed I should never in my life commit an act of Marx. Still I was crowd enough, and knew us, and so I remember seeing him with some surprise. How was it he was here among so many of me?

There was a certain weight to his name, but it was the kind that attaches to kings of Persia and other far-off figures about whom not even rumors are very directly encountered. Awkward among strangers, I'd managed to wet my sherry hand with sherry. It was a mercy that I could not wonder, in the inflated terms of my type: is it my twiglike life line from which this sherry seeps? Such reflections I reserved for a better mind than mine, the one I believed wrote my journal at the time. There was the usual ruck, then: thoughts unthought, acts unacted, clutter and confusion, reviseless speech. The Important Man was next seen shutting his back like a door in the face of a tradesman (a Balkan-faced but German-tongued librarian), the sort who seem to be, without benefit of photos, phonographs, or mirrors, multiple. I left a leaf and one damp half-shoe footprint on the rug. I wiped my sticky, moist palm on my trousers. Later we were introduced but didn't meet.

"I shall explain. A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced miracle worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish. More in a moment."

Sinking slowly inside a syllable, we do discover distinct connections of another kind, and I suppose it was that which first impressed me about Nabokov's novels: an object taken from a drawer, as a pencil is shuddered from its rest in an old desk, has not been held there by wood and physics through the years, nor does it appear now in obedience to our hero's rough tug, as some worldly pencil might. It comes to light because it has a place in the Divine Plan, otherwise a dead moth might have slid to view instead . . . a matchbook, bridge tally, or a medal. Once we make that move which Nabokov, in *Transparent Things*, so movingly describes, and pass into the state of being of his books, forgotten pencils, mislaid memories, discarded persons, all the meaningless moments that make up life (each day nothing but a noisy rail of accidents like a spill of beans) are transformed, for now every item is a pas-

sage . . . is a peephole where eyes can be seen staring at staring eyes.

"More in a moment," Nabokov writes. And there is more: there is Jack Moore, fellow student, with whom our hero rooms at college, and who separates him from the tiny table he's attempting to strangle in his sleep. He knocks books off, coughs drop. There is Julia Moore, a woman with whom he has a brief affair, although she figures largely in the plot. And then there's Giulia Romeo, a whore who motivates the nightmare which will wrap itself so fatally around the neck of our hero's wife. Another table tips on that occasion. A lamp, a book, a tumbler: tumble. So there's Romeo and Juliet, who die of error together. Etc. And there is the Moor. Connections of another kind.

How could I know, when I was mismeeting Nabokov that single time, that immediately inside his books I'd find such sentences as heretofore had not been wrought? Cunning paragraphs enclosed them; swallowed them, smiling, like benevolent whales; while around these, darkening as you descended, upright as it was best to try to be, in layers like blankets, there were several seas. Characters were inserted into scenes as one might, making love, contrive a cry to fit each likely mouth, or with one finger sled a thigh to somewhere warm as winter. "I delight sensually in Time," the Master has written, ". . . in its stuff and spread, in the fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum. I wish to do something about it; to indulge in a

simulacrum of possession. I am aware that all who have tried to reach the charmed castle have got lost in obscurity or have bogged down in Space. I am also aware that Time is a fluid medium for the culture of metaphors." And I have come to think of his novels as clocks, each marking and making its own sweet time. *Ada*, for instance. Wit-wit-wit, they go when they go round. Slowly I saw what was artistically right: how they were themselves, not imitations; they were constructions to delight the heart and stir the mind. They were not stuffed, like geese, with journalistic observations, determining and moralizing milieus, intensely instructional entanglements, those shifty banalities that do credit to their authors and also to mankind, details like so many jawless clothespins, or sentiments that bless the belly of the reader for whom they are prescribed like simple soothing syrups and bread pudding. One did not hear the tinny click and whirr of toy psychologies as the eyes and loins of the characters lit up, wet, or otherwise expressed themselves, or find the weight of sex and class was heavier than shoulders.

Thus that firm turn of Nabokov's attention, which really was my only observation of him, although the life that occupied the gesture has escaped, remains for me a sign, like the hollow changing chamber of the butterfly, of what it is to write and to create these stillatories, metaphors, transparent things: to unfold from within what is within fragrant petals of pure relation. □

A Personal View of Nabokov

BY JOYCE CAROL OATES

The world of art offers us an astonishing galaxy of personalities—artists expressing their self-images in a vast multiplicity of styles, some of them

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linked firmly to a place and a time, the "self" imagined as an embodiment of a certain era, some of them quite divorced from any earthly, temporal dimension at all. At one extreme is that entirely American personality, Walt Whitman, whose "Song of Myself" is hardly a song of Whitman *himself*; at

the other extreme, almost inaccessible to us, is Samuel Beckett, whose monologue novels are an expression of a particular self, almost selfless, pared to an existence devoid of the "world" as we know it. Nabokov is closer to Beckett, of course, but his genius is far more exciting than Beckett's because he has the ability—which is sometimes dizzying—to reach into the world for sights, sounds, words, hints, to use the world for his own purposes, to ransack the world of what he would, contemptuously, call "ordinary," unsubjective reality. *Lolita* is one of our finest American novels, a triumph of style and vision, an unforgettable work, Nabokov's best (though not most characteristic) work, a wedding of Swiftian satirical vigor with the kind of minute, loving patience that belongs to a man infatuated with the visual mysteries of the world. Yet when Nabokov talks of the work, we are disappointed, for there is an arrogant, contemptuous side of his nature that tends to distract us from his genuine accomplishments—"Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity," he says, in explaining his use of "North American sets" for the work. And he needed this stimulus, this "exhilarating milieu," or he could not have written the novel.

Marx saw history as the process of men pursuing their goals, in action. It is possible to see "literature" as the process of an infinite number of individuals pursuing their "images" of themselves and of their eras, each work of art expressing the artist's nature at the time of its execution. Yet it is necessary to realize how incredibly different we all are, how violently differing are our visions of reality—so that "reality" itself must be, in some fantastic Einsteinian paradox, an event multiplied endlessly, in each of our brains, an event split up into many fragments, *which are all equal*. The world of literature may be divided very loosely into those writers who believe this, enthusiastically, recognizing divinity everywhere—literally everywhere—like the American Transcendentalists, like Dostoevsky, like all mystics; into those who deny it flatly, and believe that they, as isolated individuals, possess all that is sacred or at least important, in themselves, and who truly do not need any sense of communion or kinship with other people. In fact, it is not really possible for these writers to feel this communion, because they do not believe—not fully—that other people exist. Nabokov has stated that ordinary reality will begin to "rot and stink" unless a subjectivity is imposed upon it. This means, of course, that ordinary

human beings—not so enchanting as *Lolita* or the other feminine targets of Nabokov's powerful, lustful imagination—will also begin to rot and stink unless someone comes along to give them value. Their "value" does not exist in themselves and certainly not in nature—it can only be given to them, assigned to them, *imagined* in them, by a confident, powerful, Magus-like personality. Who is this godly creature? Who, reading Nabokov's most revealing works (*Speak, Memory* and *Ada*), can doubt that it is only Nabokov himself?

In discussing Nabokov, I must analyze my own reactions. I believe that, as an artist, as a conscious—obsessively *conscientious* artist—he is as exciting as any writer who has ever lived. There are critics, such as Mary McCarthy, who, recoiling from the tedium of *Ada*, began to wonder whether, perhaps, earlier works like *Pale Fire* were really as good as they had believed, but I think it is unnecessary, and perhaps unfair, to put much emphasis upon a writer's weakest books. We all want to be judged by our highest accomplishments, and so we should extend to others this generosity. So there are the intensely personal, obsessive, brilliant esthetic accomplishments of Nabokov—arrangements of words on paper, exercises of skill that bear relationship, of course, to the game of chess. If he had written only *Lolita*, *Invitation of a Small Evening*, and *Speak, Memory*, he would be the "Nabokov" he is today, eccentric and brilliant. We all honor Nabokov the artist.

But my deeper and, admittedly, very personal reaction to Nabokov is quite different. To me he is a tragic figure, heroic in his isolation perhaps, or perhaps only sterile, monomaniacal, deadening to retain for very long in one's imagination. He is far more depressing than Kafka, who believed that the "divine" was everywhere *except* in himself, but who did believe passionately that he might gain access to it somehow, at some point in his life. Nabokov empties the universe of everything except Nabokov. He then assigns worth—which may seem to us quite exaggerated, even ludicrous, as in *Ada*—to a few selected human beings, focusing his powerful imagination upon the happy few, lavishing contempt and energetic humor upon most other people. Nabokov exhibits the most amazing capacity for loathing that one is likely to find in serious literature, a genius for dehumanizing that seems to me more frightening, because it is more intelligent, than Céline's or even than Swift's. Reeling from the depths of Swift's unarguable hatred for much of

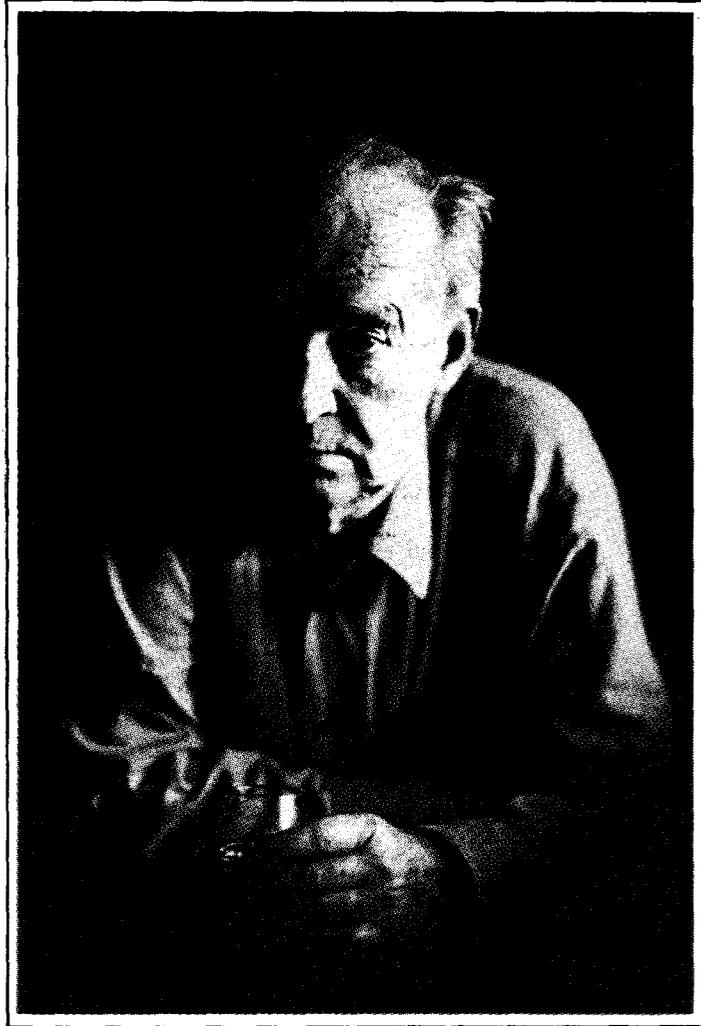
life, one can always rationalize that probably—perhaps—there was a political reason for his extraordinary vigor in attacking people who seem to us harmless or even sympathetic; and when Céline's loathing crystallized into a historical political philosophy, fascism, we could dismiss it, or at least assign it to some temporary pathology of his era. But of Nabokov, what excuses can we make?—that his early years were tragic indeed, that he suffered the loss of his father, his homeland, his entire way of life, his "untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue"?—that, ultimately, he is not American, and his scorn for the democratic ideal is something as deep in him, as natural, as his genius for words, for chess, and for the capturing of butterflies?

Still, assuming the immense differences between Nabokov, as an exiled Russian, and us, as Americans, we must admit that he is not really Russian either. He "is" only, supremely, himself. Therefore, it is understandable that he should despise certain "mediocrities"—Stendhal, Balzac, Zola, Dostoevsky, Mann—not because they are really mediocre but because they are not Nabokov. Dostoevsky especially arouses his contempt, for Dostoevsky lavished love on everyone—prostitutes, drunkards, bullies, saints, the mad, the diseased, *even* those who might have been hilarious targets for satire—transcending any particular embodiment of "self" to create a work like *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which "self" expands to contain the entire world and from which no one is really excluded. With his fastidious concern for esthetic form and the manipulation of words, Nabokov could not possibly sympathize with or even comprehend the nature of what Dostoevsky accomplished.

Yet Nabokov should have the last word, in this lovely and revealing passage from *Speak, Memory*, in which he compares the pleasure he feels upon examining a butterfly's organs under a microscope with the pleasure he derives from art. For Nabokov the butterfly must die and be dissected "for cool study," and its death is justified by the esthetic pleasure he feels as a man who has conquered one tiny aspect of nature—"In the glass of the slide, meant for projection, a landscape was reduced, and this fired one's fancy; under the microscope, an insect's organ was magnified for cool study. There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic." □

Lord Snowdon pays a visit
to Montreux and
penetrates the isolation of
Vladimir

Nabokov



Nabokov lives and works in a secluded Swiss hotel apartment. A visitor who catches him there, or strolling in the city, sees a face expressing many different characters, as though the mercurial novelist had the power to become his entire cast of fictional people.