
his and Proust's preoccupations: time and memory.

Love. Language. Time. These are the leitmotifs of the novel, and form a triumvirate and progression: body, mind and soul. *Ada* is the twentieth century's most delightful erotic frolic; it is also, as Van Veen writes in the book's epilog, "much, much more." Seen from the perspective of the late 70's, it makes Nabokov's

proposition of coloring memory with imagination a new civilizational manifesto. One wonders how many contemporary woes—sensibilities blunted to the point of atrophy, the cheapness of both human life and death, hysterical terrorism, bestiality presented as hedonism—can be confronted with this deceptively light-minded recipe. Cultivation as norm and value can rewrite the cultural code of societies and civilizations,

even those so bent on mindless change as our time and society. Here I stand, Nabokov seems to say, with all the silly irreverence, called by many culture, that I inherited from my past and my ancestors, and all their failures and blunders that took a lot of effort to commit. To me, these are my riches, a splendid foundation of the present and the future. For this allegiance—call me whatever you wish. □

Against the Bolshevik Nightmare and the Fraud of Revolution

Vladimir Nabokov: *Invitation to a Beheading*; G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, 1959. *Bend Sinister*; McGraw-Hill; New York, 1973.

by Paul Gottfried

A student once asked a professor of comparative literature, where one should look for an explicit statement of Nabokov's political views. After reflecting for a moment, the teacher responded: "Certainly not in his novels!" The answer is true, inasmuch as the author of *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and other numerous novels and short stories was rarely given to grinding political axes in his books. True, his elegant prose and fondness for opulent, old-world settings show that Nabokov was no practitioner of proletarian art. His literature contains no celebration of oppressed classes nor any glorification of social upheaval. In fact his stock and trade consist of keen interest in *haut monde* personalities, sympathetic depictions of upper-class indulgences, playfully contrived plots, and verbal acrobatics.

These characteristics have been duly noted by Nabokov's reviewers, many of whom have praised his craftsmanship while making allowances for his supposed

provincialism. Nabokov, we are led to believe, was a Russian exile who never understood the modern world. What better proofs were there than his avoidance of "serious social issues" and his continued residence in a florid Swiss hotel, from which he and his wife rarely ventured forth during the last decade of his life?

Although such observations might well bring solace to the *Saturday Review's* editorial staff, they deserve to be challenged as untrue. For one thing, Nabokov was in fact politically sensitive. His literature makes political statements, even while usually ignoring the rudely contemporary.

His autobiography, *Speak Memory*, for example, nostalgically recalls his happy upbringing in and around St. Petersburg in the years immediately preceding the First World War. His father, Vladimir Dmitrievich, an eminent jurist, was made a member of the last Russian diet (Duma) to be summoned by the Tsar in 1912. Although the elder Nabokov favored a constitutional reform of the Tsarist government, he strongly opposed the Bolsheviks, and fled with his family from the Russian capital following the communist seizure of power there in November, 1917. For a time thereafter the Nabokovs accompanied the White (anti-Bolshevik) Armies under the command of the brave, but ill-fated General Anton Denikin. When Denikin's army, badly

supplied and abandoned by their French allies, was forced to give up its struggle, the young Vladimir left Russia with his parents for exile in Western Europe. The events of the Russian Revolution moved him deeply.

As a child, Nabokov had learned English from his governess and became sufficiently expert in his adopted language to obtain admission to Cambridge University by the end of 1919. There he won honors in the study of French and Russian literature. He early engaged in a solitary intellectual guerilla with his professors and fellow-students about the nastiness of the communist regime. By 1920 he waged unsuccessfully a heated debate at the Cambridge Union with a reporter from *The Manchester Guardian* on the merits of the communist state. His defeat was owing to his inability to demonstrate to the judges his own detachment in speaking about Lenin's atrocities. At Cambridge his attacks on the Bolsheviks were interpreted, with typical liberal "fairness," as being little more than expressions of pique at his family's loss of station. It gave him a lifelong taste of Western liberalism.

Undaunted, Nabokov took up his pen in 1927 to denounce the Soviet state on the tenth anniversary of its founding. In an essay for *The (English) Rudder* he complained of the "putrid odor" caused by the most recent commemorations of the communist victory in Russia. The

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bases of the new order were mass slaughter and "an ugly stupid little nostrum which turns Russian simpletons into communist ninnies, which makes ants out of people, a new species called *Formica marxi var. lenini*." Above all he mocked "the sham aura smacking of middle-class Philistinism that is in everything Bolshevik." In the name of combating bourgeois society, the Bolsheviks were reducing culture to "political harangue" and to "the grey pages of *Pravda*."

The attack on communist brutality and tastelessness finds a further echo in a Russian poem composed in 1944, as the tide was turning for Russia in her war against the German invaders. Nabokov admonishes his fellow-*émigrés* against allowing their sympathy for the Russian people to render them oblivious to Soviet evils. He holds up to ridicule the "tinsel Soviet Rus," the mechanized officialdom of the proletariat homeland. And he cautions Russians in exile who have grown soft on Stalinist tyranny: "I am a poet, and so I must ask you to count me out."

Nabokov's abhorrence of collectivist tyranny also yielded two allegorical novels, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938) and *Bend Sinister* (1947). The first work is his response to the Moscow show trials of the 1930's. Stalin, forcing his fallen rivals to grotesque and debasing forms of public "confessions" prior to their executions, corroborated his worst premonitions about the "soul" of both revolution and communism. In *Invitation to a Beheading* the protagonist is imprisoned and condemned to death for a crime the nature of which is never made clear. Nabokov's reading of Kafka's *The Trial*, with its bleak picture of existential desperation, surely left its mark on this particular plot. But of even greater dramatic impact for the author was Stalin's treatment of political adversaries as the "manure of history," many of whom were reduced by torture to the condition of mental and physical pulp, ready to accept preposterous charges "for the good of the communist party." Like the discredited Bolsheviks in real life, the

prisoner in the novel is asked by his oppressors to cooperate in his own execution. Rather than walking sullenly to the scaffold, he is urged to dance on his way there and, then, to graciously bow to his executioner.

For all its political undertones *Invitation to a Beheading* may still be judged as a kind of universal allegory. The events take place in the distant future, while the society described appears sufficiently unlike the Soviet to enable its author to escape any charge of writing a baldly political novel. By contrast, *Bend Sinister* is the most unmistakably political, albeit one of the least read, of Nabokov's books. The setting here is a small Slavic country somewhere in Eastern Europe; its people have recently come under a dictator, obsessed with the principle of perfect equality. The historical point of reference is the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War and the subsequent imposition of communist dictatorship upon their peoples. The hero of the work, Adam Krug, is a professor of philosophy living in a country now subject to the new order. In a rapid sequence of events, his wife is lost to illness and his social position and freedom to the change of regime. While it is certainly apparent here that Nabokov despises the collectivist and egalitarian designs of the communist leaders, his delineation of the villains sometimes suggests greater artistic revulsion than moral outrage. Paduk, the people's dictator, bears the Russian name for toad; needless to say, he and his associates are made to appear physically loathsome. They seek to reduce their subjects to philistine conformity, by imposing everywhere their image of a new socialized man. Faced by the obdurate individualism present in Krug's character, they feel compelled to break him, and undertake this job, first, by humiliating him and, then, by torturing his son to death.

The political intent of *Bend Sinister* is so apparent as to refute any interpretation of Nabokov's literature as being apolitical. Although this novel does avoid

political commentary, it likewise indicates his thorough distaste for the Soviet state and for modern egalitarianism in general. It is not surprising, however, that literary critics paid tribute to Nabokov in the fifties for the erotica of *Lolita*, while hardly noticing his frank depiction of socialist dictatorship ten years earlier. After all, so many of the current makers of fashionable cultural opinion are as fervent in their opposition to anti-communism as they are in their reverence for anti-Victorianism.

As a writer Nabokov took decisive political positions, without ever descending to Maileresque poses. Even his least overtly political literature gives evidence of his hatred for social and cultural leveling. As one of his biographers has noted, communists and radicals are never treated by him with sympathy, while his love for the "old Europe," though sometimes mingled with a critical spirit, is readily apparent from his characterizations. Moreover, Nabokov himself asserts the unresolvable opposition between art and beauty, on the one side, and the collectivist Left, on the other. His rejection of the Soviet experiment was grounded as much in his commitment to literature as in his objection to Lenin's concentration camps and to Stalin's purges. In a very real sense, his art may well be considered a counter-revolutionary activity: a cultural continuation of the struggle of the White Army against communist rule.

His essay for *The Rudder* had already outlined the task of the Russian writer in exile. He describes himself and his fellow-*émigrés* as "the wave of Russia that has left her shore." Yet, precisely because of their separation from the Russian motherland, they alone of their entire nation are celebrating not enslavement, but "ten years of contempt, fidelity, and freedom." By the time of his death, Nabokov, the artist and man, had extended this glorious celebration of freedom and beauty to a period of almost fifty years. □

Lolita Then and Now: Matter-of-Fact Confession of a Non-Penitent

Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*; G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, 1958.

by Thomas Molnar

There may yet develop, in literary and legal circles, a "Lolita case," as there has been a case of *Ulysses* and of *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. This does not mean that Nabokov's book reminds me of either; if similarities are to be searched for, I would think of the eighteenth-century *Les Liaisons dangereuses* by Choderlos de Laclos, and, nearer to us, Thomas Mann's *Confessions of Felix Krull*.

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Lolita is a confession too, although certainly not of a penitent. It is far less matter-of-fact than Laclos' novel which is, like *Lolita* the narrative of two systematically planned seductions by an older man, one of his victims being a sixteen-year-old girl, conquered under the eyes of her young fiance.

Lolita's originality is that it speaks of the unspeakable in such a manner that it becomes credible, understandable, almost normal. As Lionel Trilling says, the reader simply cannot work up sufficient indignation; instead, he remains an amused observer, a sophisticated peeping Tom. Austere censors may, of course, warn him of the sensuous atmosphere in which the story is immersed, the quasi-incestuous relationship between

Humbert Humbert, a scholarly, analytical-minded, very good looking "big hunk of a man," and his twelve-year old step-daughter, the boyish-girlish "nymphet," Lolita. The censor's case is even better when he points out that this rapport borders on the horrifying since Humbert marries Lolita's mother in order to be closer to the child, and becomes the involuntary cause of his wife's death which gives him access to the nymphet's —no longer innocent—bed.

More than one bed, many beds. The last two-thirds of the novel is a fantastic journey through the forty-eight States, through motels, hotels, lodges, and rented homes, the dreary, uniform scenes of desperate love-makings and furtive side-

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"Oh, How You Have to Cringe and Hide!"

Vladimir Nabokov: *Lolita*; G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, 1958.

by Dain A. Trafton

In his essay "On a Book Entitled Lolita," Vladimir Nabokov gives a humorous but troubling account of his difficulties in finding a publisher for the book that is now considered his masterpiece. After he had finished "copying the thing out in longhand in the spring of 1954," he dispatched it to four American presses, one after another, and received four letters of rejection in return. It seems that the novel was even more shocking than either Nabokov or "a wary old friend," who advised anonymous publication, had foreseen. One publisher opined that *Lolita* could send both him and Nabokov to jail. Another "regretted there were no good people in the book." Some assumed the work to be deliberate pornography (and, Nabokov suggests,

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may have been not only shocked but bored). All considered the theme—the passionate love of a middle-aged man for a twelve year old girl, a "nymphet"—"utterly taboo."

Nabokov claims that he did not care whether his novel was judged pornographic or not. "*Lolita*," he asserts, "has no moral in tow," and aims only at affording an experience of "aesthetic bliss." The rest of us, however, ought to care whenever narrow-mindedness and lack of imagination in high places (whether in government or business) fail to distinguish between true art and pornography. Every time the publication or sale of a *Madame Bovary*, a *Ulysses*, or a *Lolita* is hindered, another "martyr" is created that can be exploited by pornographers to discredit the fight against real filth. That *Lolita* finally appeared under the auspices of the Olympia Press in Paris, a house known for its trade in erotica, provides a sad comment on the judgment of American publishers. *Lolita* is not pornographic. Nor, in spite of Nabokov's rather defiant assertion, is the "aesthetic bliss" that the

novel furnishes devoid of morality. It may be true that the book contains no "good people," but taken as a whole it expresses the rich, humane, and moral vision of life that informs all great art. Indeed, *Lolita* instructs us in the qualities that separate conscientious artistry from meretricious sensationalism.

As Nabokov himself points out, pornography cannot be defined simply as literature that deals with sex. The term describes not the subject matter of a work but rather its manner and spirit. Above all, the pornographer aims at one effect—the stimulation of lust—and he scrupulously subordinates every detail to that end. "Thus," Nabokov writes, "in pornographic novels, action has to be limited to the copulation of clichés. Style, structure, imagery should never distract the reader from his tepid lust." There is nothing tepid about *Lolita's* treatment of sex, but neither is it lustful. On the contrary, "action," "style," "structure," and "imagery"—often thought of as merely aesthetic or technical elements—func-

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