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## Comment

In July 1977, Vladimir Nabokov died. He was an American writer whose magnitude, intellectual and literary, grew from his heritage of European civilization. A progeny of Russia's upper-class intelligentsia—a stratum specific to Eastern Europe—he coalesced the best of the cultural traditions that France and England, Russia and Germany have in common.

Before he moves into the history of literature, we, at the *Chronicles of Culture*, would like to cast a glance at his—and his work's—presence in our lifetime.

Ever since I first read *Lolita*, close to two decades ago, I have felt that everything written about that book has missed the point. From the beginning I kept running into misunderstandings on the part of its commentators. To my mind, as it read in 1958 and reads now, the novel does not require an apology for its moral stance. Even if one considers it from the standpoint of rigorous behavioral standards, it can hold its own. I would risk saying that especially *now*, when crassness submerges and encroaches on basic sensibilities, *Lolita* comes across as one of those classics that makes the invisible reportable—in keeping with Conrad's literary credo. It is, in fact, a superb case for sensitivities, for self-consciousness tormented by mortification, for the belief that the mere effort to control nature and impulse may turn into a precious value. I have always seen *Lolita* as a lament for discarded norms. Today *Lolita* more than ever sounds like a cry in the midst of the ugly wilderness of pornographic subscription offerings at reduced rates.

The popular suffrage will always associate Nabokov's name with the title *Lolita* for rather sensationalist reasons. In my opinion, it is a traditional novel. The agonies of impropriety constitute one of the oldest traditions of Western humanism and literature. Nabokov does not transgress the rules. As have many before him—from Abelard to Goethe to Faulkner—he asserts that man can get lost in the jungle of sexual feelings, but the humble recognition of his feelings determines his humanness. At the time it was published, *Lolita* was read largely as a manifesto of sincerity. Twenty years later, it has acquired a different dimension, probably the one which Nabokov had in his mind at the time of the novel's conception. Cast against the America of the "sexdomes," that is brothels operating with a pretended sociological justification under names like *Plato's Retreat*, *Lolita* comes into focus as a novel of redemption through shame. Even if not very much is salvaged, the moral norm miraculously emerges from it both intact and alluring. Today, when animalism is sold as a progressive lifestyle (an insult to animals, of course, as no creature except the New York pornographic entrepreneur equates degradation with pleasure), the vicissitudes of Humbert Humbert reveal shameful as a precious option of existence to which a person should aspire for deliverance.

Thus, when musing on Nabokov, we face an awkward

syllogism: shame as an effect of psycho-sexual quandaries is supposed to be a banal, useless, regressive, unhealthy, even reactionary feeling; Nabokov saw an element of salvation in it; was he therefore a conservative, or even a reactionary?

Of course, he was. This is acknowledged even by the liberal critics, albeit all they have in mind is his conservative politics. What they rabidly deny, however is the conservative quality of his creation, the gist of his writing which is firmly contrary to the tenets of the liberal ideal and the liberal dogma. Reading what has been written about Nabokov's work since the success of *Lolita*, one has the uneasy sensation that a sort of conspiracy is operating to obfuscate the obvious, to render the literary intention reversible and turn topsy-turvy a clearly worded moral allegiance. The technique of viewing a master and his work from exactly the opposite corner he himself would have preferred to be viewed is a hoary one. Homer, Socrates, Plato, Dante, Milton, Defoe and Balzac have all suffered the same treatment. Today's liberal, so-called progressive, interpreters refuse to notice how clearly and unequivocally these masters formulated their loyalty to inherited truths, traditions and wisdom, to the continuity and permanence of values, to man's timeless duties and to the profound conviction that both human knowledge and fate transcend such feeble notions as society and progress. But the liberals, socialists and progressives have structured an edifice of idolatry on precisely these two notions, and this is why they must falsify great philosophy and great literature in the treatises with which they deluge today's culture, and in the textbooks with which they inundate the universities. To perpetuate the current ideological inanities, the entire truth about a Nabokov cannot be said.

This is why we attempt the reevaluation of Nabokov and his literature in the pages of *Chronicles of Culture*.

Among those who were forced by circumstance to celebrate the substance of the culture they were born into by means of a language other than their own, Nabokov stands as an equal of Joseph Conrad. For Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco creative work in a foreign language was a matter of technology of expression, not a reorientation toward another source of life and nourishment. "You have to be foreign to write English with that kind of hypnotized brilliance—" someone said about this kind of expatriate writing, and the paradox fits Nabokov perfectly. His demise without the Nobel prize is one of the petty errors of the Western cultural hierarchy. He will be more appreciated as time goes on. We, at the *Chronicles of Culture*, believe that our civilizational mechanism is self-corrective.

Voices are reaching us that express a wish to know more about our literary and methodological *modus operandi*. Let us, therefore, state what we see as our way of approaching cultural criticism. We depart from an assumption that culture—that is, the cultivation of ideas, arts and modes of existence—has

fallen prey, during the last quarter of a century, to a lopsided view of its own nature, one that can be best expressed by the vulgar but telling byword "Anything goes." From all branches of knowledge and literature a body of writing has emerged whose shallowness is often surpassed only by its offensiveness, but which is shielded by an ideological dogmatism that has established a mixture of scientism, materialism and irrationality as the reigning liberal philosophy in America. It goes without saying that the criticism which comes from the Liberal Culture originates from an ideologically committed point of view. Thus, the "objectivity" of which it boasts spells something very different than its meaning in ordinary semantics.

It occurred to us that in order to challenge this state of things and restore a balance we must first create a framework of contrasting judgments and set them forth. We see our task as assessing books primarily on the basis of their ideas and messages and measuring them against *our* values, ideology, commitments and beliefs.

These judgments should be personal, but not subjective. We have little esteem for reviewers who do not know how to interpret a book other than through the adjectives "bad," "good," "beautiful" or "funny." They qualify in our eyes as newspapermen and women who report on books, plays, movies. Every book, play or movie, aside from being good or bad, performs a moral, cognitive and cultural function. It has an impact on minds. It plays a social role and if it has any power at all, it contributes to cultural trends that affect human lives. Thus, to deal with cultural facts as "fun" or "entertainment" only is

to avoid the central function of the endeavor. A critic, or reviewer, who sees his duties fulfilled by giving us a briefing about the author, plot and, eventually, his own sense of what is "convincing," "boring" or "amusing," is a half-formed critic, unworthy of attention. A critic who does not bother to clarify what the author says, what he wants to say, what he prefers not to say, and finally, what influence his saying may have even if absorbed by only one person on earth—such a critic strikes us as a hack critic, merely a producer of slogans. Such critics often seek to project an image of personal evenhandedness which, in the end, turns their work into nothingness.

**I**n our view, cultural criticism should put cultural facts—books, plays, movies, intellectual debates, issues and trends—into a philosophical, moral and ideological perspective. Anything short of this goal does a disservice to culture. It is a never-ending labor. We, at the *Chronicles of Culture*, recognize the inescapable fact that progress is not an inevitable characteristic of culture and hardly exists in the arts. If it were so, Warhol would be *per definitio* a "better" painter than Giotto, and Norman Mailer automatically a "better" writer than Dostoevski—a silly presumption and simply not true. Therefore, the answer to this rather trifling observation is to evaluate the new with the help of the oldest and best tested criteria of the Judeo-Christian civilization.

—Leopold Tyrmand

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## Opinions & Views

# A Form of Magic, A Game of Enchantment and Deception

Vladimir Nabokov: *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*; G.P. Putnam's Sons; New York, 1966.

by Otto J. Scott

His Swiss governess, Mademoiselle, arrived when Nabokov was six and his brother five, in 1905—"a year of strikes, riots and police-inspired massacres." He describes her night arrival at the station, where she was met by Zahar the coachman, whose felt boots crunched the snow while he handles her luggage and helps her into the sleigh.

*"Mademoiselle gives a backward jerk of her torso as the heavy sleigh is wrenched out of its world of steel, fur, flesh, to enter a frictionless medium where it skims along a spectral road that it seems barely to touch . . . leaving Mademoiselle to be swallowed up by what she will later allude to, with awe and gusto, as le steppe. There, in the limitless gloom, the changeable twinkle of remote village lights seems to her to be the yellow eyes of wolves . . . And let me not leave out the moon—for surely there must be a moon, the full, incredibly clear disc that goes so well with Russian lustrous frosts. So there it comes, steering out of a flock of small dappled clouds . . . and, as it sails higher, it glazes the runner tracks left on the road, where every sparkling lump of snow is emphasized by a swollen shadow.*

*"Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get there? Somehow the two sleighs have slipped*

*away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to frost-dust between my fingers."*

That essentially poetic vision, which evokes both the memory and the grief of exile, also exhibits and reveals the artist. But it took Nabokov a long time to make that revelation deliberate. In the original version, which appeared in *Mesur*, in Paris, in 1936, the reminder that the artist was standing on a highway in New England did not appear. It was only when he reviewed the piece for *Speak, Memory* that it was revised; improved. Retouched, so to speak, by the painter before he parted with it forever—and then in such a manner as to move the viewer not only beside him, but inside him.

A subtle and revealing nature of the remembrance of things past pervades Nabokov's sentences. Such reorganization of memory had once served Proust in dissecting reality. In Nabokov's pages, the reconstruction of what's still perceptible, as well as what is not, turns into an allusive revisionism. By the magic of delicate musing and ironic sighs, by elongating the perspectives of both tenderness and skepticism, Nabokov transforms Talleyrand's famed words about the sweetness of life before revolutions into moral splendor.

Only a great poet can cast that sort of spell. Nabokov, in the vignettes that comprise his autobiography, did it twice. When these episodic recollections first appeared in various popular magazines to glitter against the drab backdrop of

the late Forties and early Fifties, they seemed mere entertainments—though of a very high order. Each reflects a vanished world, with its heritage and treasures, its once-rooted security and its shining future. But, subtly reworked and strung together in the order that Nabokov had, all along, held secretly in view, they do far more than provide a portrait of the artist in retrospection. For within their completed circle, these pearl-memories hold, forever fast, values that lesser men seek to destroy.

Nabokov was an aristocrat, born to great wealth, surrounded by servants and comforts, and spent his first twenty years in the warm approval of liberal parents. It would be easy to assume that his values were those of the aristocracy. But the truth was that his values were those of a world that *contained* an aristocracy—and that world was one in which all our grandparents lived and moved.

Nabokov's father was a famous liberal jurist, who defended Jews and promoted parliamentary democracy; his mother doted on games and her children. She enjoyed playing draw poker—a game learned from the diplomatic colony, which the Russian upper class played in French. *Brelan* was three of a kind and a flush was *coleur*; jokers were "omnivorous." The entire Nabokov family played ardent tennis; in the summers went on mushroom hunts. As a boy Nabokov devoured the lurid western novels of Captain Mayne Reid—in English—while his European counterparts read their equivalents.

The family had a large country estate south of St. Petersburg and a townhouse at 45 Morskaya Street, and fifty servants. The Nabokovs were not particularly religious: Nabokov's mother held both the liturgy and the clergy of the Greek

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Mr. Scott is an author of biographies of James I and Robespierre.