

Nabokov's Appendix

Notes on Prosody. By VLADIMIR NABOKOV.
Routledge, 16s.

THE TRADITIONAL non-book is large and full of pictures; this one is small and full of tables, numerals, and funny words. These "notes on English and Russian tetrameters" originally—and justly—constituted an appendix to Nabokov's important translation-edition of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1964). Detached now from the only context that can give them meaning, Nabokov's observations on Russian and English verse structure flagrantly lack point. Gertrude Stein is reported to have told Hemingway that remarks are not literature; someone should tell publishers that an appendix is not a book. If this volume were titled *Pyrrhic Substitution in Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin"* and emitted by a sincere old lady—a candidate for a bad doctor's degree—from a minor American university press, how we should rail! How we should mock its pedantry and pity its insignificance! And yet for all its admirable energy and bustle, and for all its welcome gaiety, Nabokov's demonstration leads exactly to this small point—that Pushkin is a master of pyrrhic substitution.

But pedantry (at least the standard kind) and insignificance cannot be Nabokov's *métier*: everything must be twisted into at least a simulacrum of idiosyncrasy and portent. Distressed like everyone else by the inadequacy of the received English prosodic terms, Nabokov has programmatically obscured matters further by contriving his own terminology. "I have been forced," he says with an irony which becomes always more apparent as we press forward, "to invent a simple little terminology of my own." Thus what a mere graduate student, in his simplicity, would call a pyrrhic foot Nabokov calls a "scudded foot," or a "scud"; what an ordinary person would call a trochaic foot, or in a predominantly iambic poem an inversion of stress, Nabokov calls a "tilt." Whatever their necessity, these terms have at least the merit of comedy, and Nabokov, wit that he is, clearly revels in manipulating this mock-pedagogic language and thus in playing out the role of farcical pedagogue, as he has earlier delighted to play the roles of literate nympholept in *Lolita* and mad scholarly annotator in *Pale Fire*. Here, as if we were listening still to the wildly intelligent but fatally disordered zany who presides over *Pale Fire*, we are told of "semiscuds" and "split tilts"; we are vouchsafed terms like "scuddable" and fruity phrases like "a surge of scuds."

Sometimes the idiom of the bird-watcher, or

even of the lepidopterist himself, takes over, as when we are invited to scrutinise "the rare 'long tilt'." This calling ordinary things by funny or magical names has always been a large part of Nabokov's happy stock in trade when he has appeared before us in his various comic *personae*: in *Pale Fire* it is the lowly blackhead which is elevated to mock-consequence by being denominated a comedo. But when, impatient of the ingenuousness of his prosodic predecessors, our author here finds it necessary to speak of the "false spondee" and the "false pyrrhic," he conducts us into something very like the world of Sick Fiction, where the farcical Guru-Daddy at the end of *Lollipop* assures Candy that what she is about to experience may resemble—deceptively—"the so-called 'orgasm'." We have had ample Camp humour recently: this is the first time we have had Camp prosody. It is as if Baron Corvo had essayed a treatise on metallurgy, or Ronald Firbank a manual of operating-room practice.

AND YET for the reader willing to plough through this wild heap of wit Nabokov provides compensations. When he tires of being cute, his awareness of metrical context is sensitive and instructive. As he says, "An iambic foot cannot be illustrated by a word unless that word is part of a specific iambic line." And valuable too is his brief discourse on the conventions and implications—largely whimsical or burlesque—that have attended the iambic tetrameter line in English. In Russian it became in the nineteenth century the staple line for serious verse, the equivalent in English of the iambic pentameter or in French of the syllabic hexameter. Why, on the other hand, does the English tetrameter imply so readily a vacation from the rigours of heroic sobriety and serious commitment? We think of Prior, Gay, and Swift. Nabokov rightly lays a large part of the blame on the enormous popularity and staying power of Butler's *Hudibras*, which transformed a line capable of emotional range in the hands of Surrey, Shakespeare (Sonnet cxlv), and Milton into a vehicle apparently more fit for "boisterous and obscure topical satire, the dismally comic, mock-heroic poem, the social allusion sustained through hundreds of rhymed couplets, the academic tour de force..." Although Nabokov forgets one recent master of the tetrameter—Yeats, who is not mentioned in the book—his point is just and important, even if it is a little hard on eighteenth-century English poetry.

Prosodically the Augustan Age is Nabokov's black beast: it is always "the pedestrian eighteenth century" or "that most inartistic of centuries." But this tired, automatic disvaluing

of Augustan poetry is all based, apparently, on the eighteenth-century performance in tetrameter verse, and this is about as fair as judging twentieth-century poetry by its performance in, say, the limerick or the clerihew and then condemning the "century" for wanting emotional and aesthetic adequacy. Everyone knows that in the eighteenth century the tetrameter line was conventional for songs, fables, and various kinds of foolery and drollery, and that it was a line with a much richer spectrum of conventions—the strictly decasyllabic pentameter of *The Dunciad*, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, and *The Borough*—that poets of that century wielded with such memorable grace, wit, and power. All this is to be misrepresented because Nabokov, urged by his ambition to "compare," must have English tetrameters to compare with Russian ones.

And it is here that we are brought face to face with the weakness of the "comparative" method in criticism. The fact is that literatures, at least when regarded not thematically but technically, are not comparable, not if we know a language sufficiently to have become really adept in its literature. Perhaps novels in different languages can be talked about comparatively since scrutiny of their finest textures seems to most critics a less pressing obligation than inspection of their themes and architecture. Look what Nabokov does when he ventures technical comparisons of poems even within one literature: he compares apples with camels. He offers a few lines of—among other poems—Johnson's *On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet*, Keats' *The Eve of St. Mark*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as somehow prosodically related and somehow prosodically relevant to Pushkin's verse-making. Actually these English samples are only very dubiously comparable in texture, for one is a domestic elegy in a version of hymn-stanza replete with overtones of the English Protestant sense of duty; another is a romance in couplets bearing entirely different, pseudo-medieval implications deriving from the "folk"-dimension of Bishop Percy's ballad revival and of its prosody; the last is a meaningfully redundant personal elegy in a very special stanza which determines powerfully its own metrical conventions. It is true that all these poems are "written in iambic tetrameter," but that information is of little use if we are really interested even in the mechanics of poetry. To be told by Nabokov of the *In Memoriam* extract that "I have chosen this as a particularly brilliant example of scudding (based mainly on monosyllables and partly owing to the repetition of a specific split tilt)" is to have the rhythm described but not interpreted. It is to abandon criticism for science, or pseudo-science. Prosodic



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talk ends as a mere pastime unless it finally locates specific links in specific poems between linguistic and metrical meanings. Nabokov tells us of *Eugene Onegin* that "There are several stanzas containing as many as five ["second-foot scudders": read "pyrrhic feet in the second position"]; and one stanza (One: xxi, *Onegin's* arrival at the theatre) breaks the record with six." But what we want is not the record-keeping of the hobbyist but the criticism of the expert: Nabokov does not tell us what relation there is between Pushkin's sense of *Onegin* at the theatre and a spate of unaccented syllables. If there is none, the prosody is accidental and critically undiscussible.

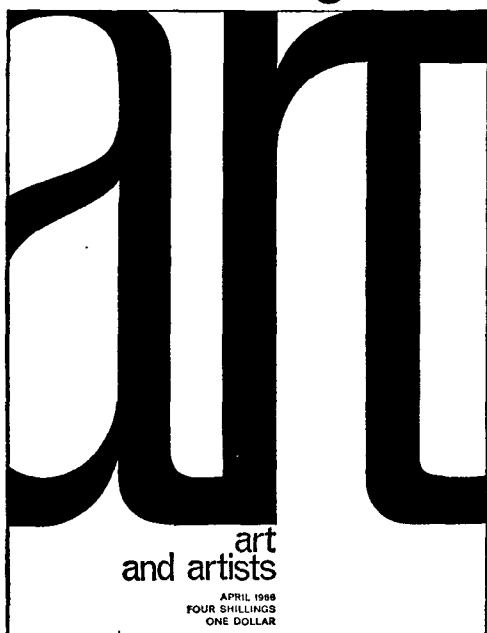
NABOKOV'S ELABORATE "comparative" and "taxonomical" procedures do yield some conclusions that no one is likely to quarrel with. He finds that Russian prosody is different from English because the languages are quite different. Russian abounds in polysyllabic words having only a single accent. Russian poets are thus able to make omission of stress ("scudding") a common technical beauty. English poets, on the other hand, managing a language rich in monosyllables, have developed more fully than the Russians what the old-fashioned would want to call spondaic substitution. But we have always known that the two languages, not to mention the two cultures, are not the same. We would expect their poetries to be different.

Actually even in what appears to be one language, different poetries are not close enough to each other to be comparable except in the coarsest kind of classroom. The idioms and *genres*, and therefore the prosodies, of John Donne and Matthew Arnold—two of Nabokov's authors of "tetrameters"—are comparable only by the most generous sort of courtesy. It is all so much harder than Nabokov, with his amateur's unsteady tone—now airy and inconsequential, now perspiring and statistical—makes it out to be. He says early on that in his researches he has not found "a single work that treated English iambics—particularly the tetrameter—on a taxonomical and comparative-literature basis," and here he imagines that he is scorning the past instead of saluting its admirable sense of the uniqueness of separate languages and its happy disinclination to press specious and irrelevant comparisons.

But to say this much runs the risk of breaking a butterfly-collector upon a wheel. An appendix, no matter how skilfully excised, preserved, and exhibited, remains an appendix; whimsy, no matter how artfully disguised as scholarship or criticism, remains whimsy. And it is the whimsy of Nabokov's approach to poetic technique, his constant pursuit of the *outré*, his late-romantic impressionism and idiosyncrasy, that are finally the most striking things about this little volume. He has always delighted in parody, and what we have here is like a parody of a dissertation or a textbook. The *genre* he is working in is close to that of Pound's *ABC of Reading*, but if in Pound's work we catch the tones of an angry middle-western Populist of the late-nineteenth century, Nabokov's spiritual ancestry goes even further back. It extends through Lewis Carroll and Thomas Love Peacock to Laurence Sterne himself.

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Erich Auerbach

Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and the Middle Ages. By ERICH AUERBACH. *Routledge*, 35s.

ALMOST TWENTY YEARS ago, Erich Auerbach published one of the great critical books of our time. The power of *Mimesis* has increased, if anything, in the interval, but its original force owed something to the time and place of writing and to the exact moment of publication in the year after the end of the Second World War. Auerbach had been dismissed under the racial laws from his chair at the University of Marburg in 1935 and had gone to teach at the Turkish State University in Istanbul, where he remained until his migration to the United States in 1947. Had the Nazis never come to power and had he been able to remain in Germany, with continued access to good professional libraries, he might have written very different books. They would have been remarkable for knowledge and comprehension, for suppleness and strength, but they could scarcely have commanded the nobility of *Mimesis*. This is a function of the circumstances of exile.

This new book,¹ despite the specialist ring of its title, is as important as *Mimesis* for the modern literary public—given the impulse of that public towards self-preservation. *Mimesis*, it is true, remains the most comprehensive and general statement of Auerbach's view of European literature. But the more limited time-span of the new book allows him to be more specific about how "European philology" can lead to an understanding of the literary public of the past and its relevance to that of the present. Auerbach believed that the present generation is the last that could participate fully in the European classico-Christian literary culture which his books record with such humanity. Himself a majestic participant (how many of us can say that we know even a few of "his" authors as he does?), he can in this book focus upon the conflict between pagan and Christian notions, practitioners and consumers of literature just at the moments which are decisive not merely for their time but also for us, the literary public, the reading men of today. His own immense but unostentatious learning, and his exemplary interpretative and sympathetic powers, combine to show how, during the Middle Ages, the bases of European thought, the criteria of literary style, and the constitution of the literary audience

underwent a fundamental change, the effects of which are still with us. Old Rome itself and its gods lost their significance except as *figurae* of the truth and the Roman grand manner gave place to a new and radically altered sublime style and a vernacular literary language. This is why we have a better chance of understanding Dante than Virgil. The sublimity of the *Divine Comedy* depends upon its being a record of a universally accessible experience in a language easily understandable but also unmistakably a literary language, a *Hochsprache*, and not upon a measured, commemorative, "distanced" grandeur of style and subject. Had it been Dante's intention to attempt such a thing, as we know from his own words, he would have chosen the superior *genre* of tragedy and the more lasting language of Latin. As it is, the *Comedy* is the climax of the humble-sublime style which came into being in late Antiquity and permeated the whole of medieval literature.

SERMO HUMILIS, the expression which forms the title of the first essay in the book, was the name given by ancient rhetoricians to the lowest of the three styles of discourse. As the mode reserved for the description of base and trivial events, in

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¹ First published posthumously as *Literatursprache und Publikum in der lateinischen Spätantike und im Mittelalter* (Bern, Francke Verlag, 1958). Ralph Manheim's English translation is published in New York by the Bollingen Foundation.