

LITERARY HORIZONS

All About Vladimir

VLADIMIR NABOKOV has prepared a new edition of his autobiography, originally published in 1951 in this country as *Conclusive Evidence*, in England as *Speak, Memory*. The present version is called *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (Putnam, \$6.75). Nabokov has added from twenty-five to fifty pages, mostly concerned with his forebears, especially his father, whom he describes vividly and with affection. A few passages have been expanded, and there has been some stylistic revision, but the book has not been changed in any fundamental way.

What we have is what we had before—an extraordinary evocation of the life of the Russian upper class before World War I. The Nabokovs were people of social rank, considerable wealth, cosmopolitan culture, and liberal political views. The wealth and leisure they enjoyed were not abused but, by and large, served both conscience and intelligence. Young Nabokov received the education of a poet rather than the education of an autocrat, but he was bound to be an autocratic poet.

Most of the book describes Nabokov's life before the Bolshevik Revolution, which took place in his eighteenth year. The family escaped from Petrograd to the Crimea, but soon was forced to migrate to England and the Continent. Nabokov writes a little about his years at Cambridge University, and then briefly tells what it was like to be an exile and a writer in Western Europe from 1922 to 1940. It was in the latter year that he and his wife and their child fled to the United States, and it is with their departure that the book ends.

Although Nabokov wrote ten or a dozen books in Russian during his European exile, he barely touches on his literary career. He does say things, however, that bear directly or indirectly on problems raised by his novels and short stories. "In the course of my twenty years of exile," he observes, "I devoted a prodigious amount of time to the composing of chess problems. A certain posi-

tion is elaborated on the board, and the problem to be solved is how to mate Black in a given number of moves, generally two or three. It is a beautiful, complex, and sterile art related to the ordinary form of the game only insofar as the properties of a sphere are made use of both by a juggler in weaving a new act and by a tennis player in winning a tournament."

After describing the fascination that the construction of such problems had for him, he continues, "Deceit, to the point of diabolism, and originality, verging upon the grotesque, were my notions of strategy." And lest the reader should fail to see that what Vladimir Nabokov says about his chess problems is applicable to his fiction, he declares: "It should be understood that competition in chess problems is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of the problem's value is due to the number of 'tries'—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray."

Nabokov thus admits that each of his novels is a game in which he tries to mislead his reader and prove his superiority over him, and this is exactly what certain critics have charged. In *Escape Into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (Dial, \$4.50), Page Stegner sets out to "dispel the notion that he is simply a trickster, a hoax player, and not a serious artist." Yet Stegner begins by demonstrating that Nabokov is a trickster, whatever else he may be. Even in his autobiography he plays tricks, alluding in flattering terms to V. Sirin, a novelist in exile, without mentioning the fact that, as Stegner points out, he himself, Nabokov, wrote under the name of V. Sirin. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the narrator, V., and Sebastian, about whom V. is writing, may be, according to Stegner, "divided halves of

- 27 Granville Hicks reviews "Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited," by Vladimir Nabokov; "Escape Into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov," by Page Stegner, and "Nabokov's Quartet," by Vladimir Nabokov
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a single identity." In analyzing *Bend Sinister*, whose narrative technique is strangely complicated, Stegner speaks of "a perverse talent that keeps the reader uneasily looking over his shoulder (as he steps out over the precipice) for the ambush he suspects lies behind." *Pnin* seems more straightforward than the earlier fiction, but its simplicity is in part a deception. *Lolita* is full of the "false scents" Nabokov has talked about—"word games," Stegner calls them—and in *Pale Fire* meaning lies below meaning, like the buried cities of Troy.

But Stegner insists that Nabokov is a serious artist and not merely a prestidigitator. The first point he makes is that Nabokov is a master stylist, with an amazing control over a language that is not his native tongue. In the second place, Stegner argues that Nabokov is an impressionist, in the tradition of James, Proust, Joyce, and Faulkner, and that the tricks he plays are calculated to make the kind of impression he wants. The third point is suggested by the title of Stegner's book. Escape from what? one

asks. Speaking of Krug in *Bend Sinister*, Stegner writes, "His discovery that death is 'but a question of style' is the Nabokovian conviction repeatedly demonstrated in other books . . . that the only redemption from the horrors of existence is through the adoption and pursuit of a style."

Though he values Nabokov highly, Stegner is no idolator. He questions Mary McCarthy's statement that *Pale Fire* is "one of the very great works of art of this century," finding it rather too much like an impossibly difficult crossword puzzle. On the other hand, he regards *Lolita* as "a truly great novel," for he discovers in it the kind of "moral truth" he cannot discern in *Pale Fire*. I cannot go all the way with Stegner, but I have learned a good deal from him. As the first book by a very young critic and as the first book about a singularly difficult writer, *Escape Into Aesthetics* is a remarkable achievement.

Nabokov's Quartet (Phaedra, \$3.95) spans, as the author points out, "four decades of literary life." "An Affair of Honor," the earliest story, shows that even as a young man Nabokov knew how to bring a trick off. Although the author warns against calling "The Visit to the Museum" Kafkaesque or Freudian, it is an allegory of some sort. "The Vane Sisters," the only one of the stories originally written in English, is another sort of game, and amusing enough, although one would be likely to miss the ultimate joke if the author's preface didn't offer a clue. Nabokov has written better stories than these, but they do suggest how persistently and in how many ways he has invited the reader to a contest of wits.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

FRASER YOUNG'S LITERARY CRYPT No. 1222

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1222 will be found in the next issue.

PAL DU EXGD SA HG PDFOEAU-

DHVG EF AZEUAIF, FEUQG ES

ZIFS DPSGLRDLX HG DVRDJF

AVX-PDFOE AUGX.

—FDUSDJDUD

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1221

Thinking is more interesting than knowing, but less interesting than looking.

—GOETHE.

LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



Irate Doves

I EXPECT IT IS DIFFICULT to find anyone who is neither a "hawk" nor a "dove" to review books on Vietnam [SR, Dec. 17]. But no one could be a more prejudiced "hawk" than William Henderson.

Obviously Mr. Henderson and his Mobil Oil Company would like to have the United States set up dictatorships in all small countries so that Mr. Henderson and Mobil Oil Co. could more and more readily manipulate matters for the greatest profits to themselves from the foreign resources. Basically, I expect Johnson is fighting the Vietnam war as a favor to Henderson and Mobil Oil Company and their like.

ADOLPH MURIE.

MOOSE, Wyo.

WILLIAM HENDERSON TAKES William G. Burchett to the shed for obvious bias. It is the bias of a man who is reporting for the invaded—his target, the invader. In his prior book Mr. Burchett covered the necessary historical antecedents. Subsuming all is his main thesis—that the only stranger in Vietnam is the American.

Mr. Henderson's view is quite faithful. I suspect, to his position in the pay of Mobil Oil. . . .

CLAUDE TRUDEAU.

Bridgeport, Conn.

MR. HENDERSON wonders why Dorothy Dunbar Bromley's *Washington and Vietnam* was published at all—this conclusion being substantiated on nothing more, apparently, than a few misspelled words that he deals with at some length, together with Miss Bromley's emotional attitude. It is apparently not kosher to have an emotional attitude on Vietnam.

Mr. Henderson began his review of her book by saying it "purported" to be a historical record of our involvement in that conflict. He does not refute any of her material. Indeed he does not dwell on it further. Yet Mr. Henderson is the editor of *Vietnam Perspectives*. I can only assume he either does not know enough about the history of our involvement and therefore used the word "purported," or he was propagandizing his own point of view.

JOHN SOMERVILLE.

Ardmore, Pa.

IN HIS REVIEW OF MY BOOK, *Washington and Vietnam*, William Henderson charges me with "innumerable factual inaccuracies," but fails to document a single one apart from the misspelling of two proper names and my incredible slip in calling Annam, Assam, which I know well enough is in India. Misspellings, which prove me an imperfect proof-reader, are one thing; misstatements are something else again.

Is Mr. Henderson, by any chance, attempting to sweep under the rug a long series of unpalatable facts bearing on our

military intervention in South Vietnam, by the device of impugning my credibility? To take but one example, I quote in my chapter on The Geneva Agreements, our government's pledge, made at the 1954 Conference, "to refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb" the Agreements; and the International Control Commission's subsequent statement, in a 1957 Interim Report, that there had been introduced into South Vietnam "U.S. military personnel in five U.S. aircraft," together with "1,000 revolvers and 610 cases of revolver ammunition."

Mr. Henderson further comments that most of my sources—Fall, Lacouture and their like, are "doves . . . persistent critics of Administration policy." Along with documents, Presidential statements and policy decisions from Truman on, Senate hearings, news reports—in particular those from the Saigon Bureau of the *New York Times*—periodical articles, analyses by A.I.D. officials, etc., I have relied to a considerable extent on the witness of Bernard Fall and Jean Lacouture because of their long acquaintance with the area, their continuing on-the-scene studies, and the high quality of their scholarship.

DOROTHY DUNBAR BROMLEY.
New York, N.Y.

ACCORDING TO MY POINT OF VIEW, Mrs. Bromley's book is a timely and welcome addition to the literature on the subject of Vietnam. Mr. Henderson's assumption that the author adopted a point of view and then set about to construct a plausible, intellectual defense of her position from whatever materials came to hand, has no justification to be found in the book or in the author's long career of careful writing. Why did Mr. Henderson not make the much more plausible assumption (from the contents of the book and from the facts, if he had taken the slightest pains to discover them) that Mrs. Bromley was profoundly disturbed by the horrors of the war and this nation's responsibility in it, particularly the escalation of its intensity and ravages, and then set down what she believed to be a statement drawn from authoritative sources?

LEROY BOWMAN.

Brooklyn, N.Y.

MAY I REGISTER a vigorous dissent from the flood of dovish vituperation which William Henderson's informed and well-balanced "The Battle of Words Over the War" will undoubtedly provoke?

And where can I get hold of *Vietnam Perspectives*?

DONALD A. NEWTON.

St. Albans, Vt.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The address for *Vietnam Perspectives* is 234 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10001.