Prospero's Progress

ONE cannot hope to understand an author if one cannot even pronounce his name," Vladimir Nabokov has observed. The point, originally made about Nikolai Gogol (pronounced *Gaw*-gol), applies to Nabokov himself. Over the years he has repeatedly complained about the damage inflicted on the Nabokov name in its passage through foreign ports of articulation. Nab-*o*-kov, *Nab*-o-kov, Nah-bo-*kov*, are frequent errors. Rare mutations, he reports, include Nahba-cocoa and Na-*bob*-kopf. The correct sound, says the man who made the name famous, is Nah*boa*koff. Slipping on the mask of a straight face for an instant, he continues: "Vladeemir, as in 'redeemer.' "

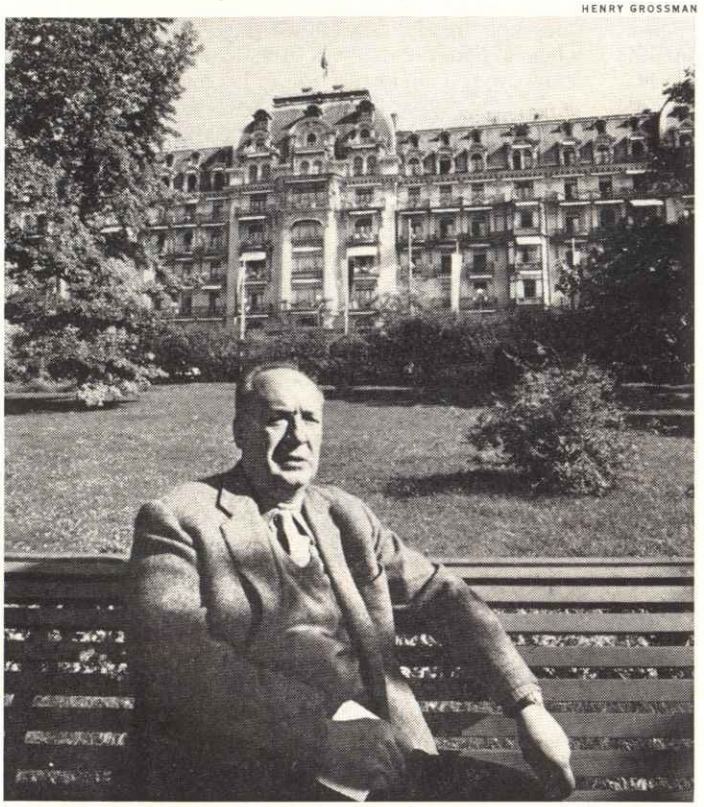
This last is just the sort of phonetic parallel Nabokov relishes. Similarly, he is fond of insisting that, with minor adjustments for Julian and Gregorian dating systems, he shares an April 23 birth date with William Shakespeare. But then, he adds, "So does Shirley Temple."

This little charade is just a conversational pleasantry. Or is it? Who can ever be sure with Nabokov? Perhaps he has something more in mind. Devout Nabokov watchers might find clues in those references to Julius Caesar and Pope Gregory. They might see implications of the fall of Rome, the rise of Byzantium, and a consequent gap between East and West that makes comparisons impossible between Anglo-Saxon writers (Shakespeare) and Slavic writers (Nabokov).

Slightly pedantic word play, cultural booby traps, brisk leaps from the Bard of Avon to the *Good Ship Lollipop*, elegant *divertissements* for all occasions —such things can be expected of Nabokov. But that is far from all. Russian by birth, a U.S. citizen who now lives in Switzerland, he has become, at 70, the greatest living American novelist, and the most original writer and stylist since Joyce. He is also an exile, a man who has triumphantly survived this century of the refugee, a man who has lost everything, yet transformed his losses through art and levity into a habitation of the mind.

Nabokov's literary province is a bizarre, aristocratic, occasionally maddening amusement park in part devoted to literary instruction. It has many sideshows but only one magician. The general public, which chose to read *Lolita* as a prurient tale of pedophilia, enters through the main gate, hoping to meet the creator of that doomed and delectable child. A more sophisticated clientele moves beyond the midway to seek out and applaud Dr. Nabokov, the butterfly chaser, dealer in anagrammatical gimcracks, triple-tongued punster, animator of *Doppelgänger*, shuffler of similes. Prolonged exposure to Nabokov reveals much more. What he calls his "ever-ever" land of artifice opens on intriguing distances. There words transform the world into metaphor and time is held exquisitely at bay by memory.

HENRY GROSSMAN



NABOKOV AT HOME IN MONTREUX

Between the brink of parody and the abyss of seriousness.

Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle, Nabokov's latest novel, is already a best-seller. Nabokov's peculiar fascination —and enduring power—escapes conventional measurement, but by any standard, the range and volume of his work in two languages is prodigious. It includes 15 novels (nine Russian, six English) and translations of other writers' work. His fiction differs from most novels in much the same way that a poem differs from a political treatise. One is an end in itself. The other, however intricate and elegant, is a means to an end. In a classic sneer at the use of plot in poetry, T. S. Eliot has compared it to a lump of meat thrown a house dog by a burglar (the writer) to keep him busy while the real business is attended to—rifling the silver cupboard or dealing in the wizardry of words. Nabokov feels the same way.

A Nabokov novel is intended not as a message—but as a delight. It is also a game in which the alert reader is rewarded by feelings of wonder at the illusiveness of reality. "In a first-rate work of fiction," he argues, "the real clash is not between the characters, but between the author and the world." Nabokov's books are conceived like the chess problems that he has composed during the past half-century. He describes in an early novel the miraculous way in which a flat, abstract contrivance (in chess or art) can take on vitality and light: "Little by little, the pieces and squares began to come to life and exchange impressions. The crude might of the queen was transformed into refined power, restrained and directed by a system of sparkling levers; the pawns grew cleverer; the knights stepped forth with a Spanish caracole . . . Every creator is a plotter; and all the pieces impersonating his ideas on the board were here as conspirators and sorcerers."

To see through Nabokov's fun and games to his underlying sadness and seriousness requires an understanding of the unfashionable notion that games can be both creative and profound. The essence of the Nabokov creative method is parody. His creatures are not symbols or branches snatched from *The Golden Bough*. But they are haunted by literary ancestors. Enjoying parody requires knowledge of the literary forms and fashions being spoofed—which is one reason why Nabokov is difficult. "He is not the kind of novelist," says Anthony Burgess, "whom you sit down to with a Scotch or an apple." In a rare moment of explicit self-exposure, Nabokov once explained: "While I keep everything on the very brink of parody, there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and the caricature of it."

Nabokov's truths, and *Ada*, will certainly unhouse many readers from the comfort of their passive reading habits.

As an easy entry on the boy-meets-girl plot level, Nabokov indulges in a tale about Van Veen and his half sister Ada Veen. They fall in love at the respective ages of 14 and twelve and begin an energetic sex life in the nooks and dells of the family's rural estate. Over the years, their floating orgy suf-

fers prolonged periods of inactivity. In their old age, however, Van and Ada reunite and mate—now in a highly figurative way—melding into an unbeing that Nabokov calls Vaniada. Licensed allusion hunters will find that Vanadis is an epithet for Freya, the popular Swedish sex goddess who was also close to her brother.

Nabokov sums up these amorous doings in a mock dust-jacket blurb that closes *Ada* by describing only the book's most superficial aspects. Long before he gets around to that, though, a suspicion has set in that the surface love story is as different from the real *Ada* as a bicycle reflector is from a faceted ruby. More even than *Lolita* and *Pale Fire, Ada* is studded with assaults and asides directed at literary forms, figures and fashions. Along with its masquerade as a delicious *fin de siècle amour,* Nabokov provides the most unconventional commentary on the novel ever written.

Periodic Needles

Beginning with an inversion of Tolstoy's remark that all happy families are alike, its early chapters plunge forward on rubble created by assaults on the mannerisms of regional romance and dynastic memoir. Science fiction, sexual symbolism, popular novels that get turned into movies come under fire. So do impressionistic translations. Characters mimic Jane Austen and Dickens. Poets Auden and Lowell are spliced into a modern entity called "Lowden, a minor poet and translator." The celebrated Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges is yawned offstage as Osberg, a contriver of "mystico-allegoric anecdotes." Meanwhile, the children's flabby governess is writing Maupassant's *The Diamond Necklace* and Jean Cocteau's *Les Enfants Terribles,* an indication of Nabokov's opinion of both.

To précis *Ada* as a love story is like describing *Lolita* as a cautionary tale for Girl Scouts. But the literary brickbats, too, as well as the snatches of Russian, the quadrilingual puns, the satiric undercuts, are all embellishments—provided partly to tease scholars, who are now so far behind Nabokov's accumulation of literary clues and *culs de sac* that it will take years of footnoting to catch up. (Ardis, the family seat, becomes Arrowhead Manor, *Le Château de la Flèche,* Flesh Hall.)

Nabokov's text, as often before, is disguised as an unpublished manuscript. It ostensibly reflects Van Veen's memories of his 83-year-long affair with Ada. Yet, anyone who thinks that *Ada* is Van's book need only rearrange the letters of VAN'S BOOK until they spell NABOKOV'S. Once the creator's name has been uttered, *Ada's* profoundest purpose comes into view. *Lolita* displays more human feeling. But *Ada* is the supreme fictional embodiment of Nabokov's lifelong, bittersweet preoccupation with time and memory. Nabokov is acutely aware that it is only through memory that we possess the past. But how fragile that hold is—and how much art and individuality depend upon it! In *Speak, Memory,* his mesmeric autobiography, he wrote without his customary protective irony:

"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness. Nature expects a full-grown man to accept these two black voids, fore and aft, as stolidly as he accepts the extraordinary visions in between. I rebel against this state of affairs. I feel the urge to take my rebellion outside and picket nature."

Tricks with time, thoughts on time, even a chapter on "The Texture of Time" interweave *Ada.* The love story does not "really" start until page 555, when a phone call from Ada to aging Van causes a chain reaction in his memory, linking the images of his youth and transforming the past into a "glittering now." Appearing late in the novel, the "Texture" essay is a recondite attempt on Van's part to caress the essence of time with the same ardor with which he once possessed Ada.

It is futile. One can almost hear Van's creator sighing at these efforts to have carnal knowledge of the infinite. "You lose your immortality when you lose your memory," Van remarks at one point. "And if you land on Terra Caelestis [Heaven], with your pillow and chamberpot, you are made to room not with Shakespeare or even Longfellow, but with guitarists and cretins."

Ada cannot rightfully be separated from its language, from the chaos of literary allusions, the geographical and genealogical data. But its glory rises from the fragrance of things that have been lost but cannot be forgotten. Central to its timelessness is the anachronistic world of Ada and Van's youth. Known as Antiterra, it is physically like a mixture of pastoral 19th century Russia and Canada and the modern U.S.

Antiterra's "current events" rove timelessly between an imagined future, in which Mississippi is run entirely by Negroes, and a fabled past, in which the Crimean War, occurring in 1886, is fought with modern war planes. For a while, space and time are suspended. Ultramodern "dorophones" ring, planes fly, and magic carpets skim cool glades without so much as a patent pending.

En route, some of the characters perish by fire, water and air—fleeting reminders of a return to elemental states. Age comes finally. Time reasserts itself. As the artifice is revealed, one almost expects to hear the snap of Prospero's wand. For this is Nabokov's autumnal fairy tale. Though not his finest book, it is certainly his most brilliant attempt yet to ransack the images and thoughts of his own past and shape them into a glittering now of the imagination.

Any critic foolish enough to exclaim "Aha!" over gross parallels between Na-

continued on page 84

"I Have Never Seen

The Nabokovs have lived in Montreux for nine years. Recently, TIME *Reporter Martha Duffy visited them there. Here are a few of her impressions:*

"Choughs! Choughs! Alpine choughs! A little black bird with a yellow bill. A lacquered yellow bill. And red feet."

"Oh, chuffs," the heedless visitor says. "Aren't they crows?"

"A crow? a CROW? No, no, no, no, no, my goodness no, not a crow at all. They emit a beautiful sound, a sort of kissing sound—*chwink, chwink*—which a crow cannot even approach. Pity is that they do it right on my window sill at dawn."

So the day starts early for Vladimir Nabokov, when the nervy choughs commence kissing outside the sixth floor of the Montreux Palace Hotel. Not that there has been much night for him. "I am the insomniac of universal literature," he cries. "My wet nurse complained. I was always up, smiling and looking around with my bright eyes. I am awakened by my own snore, which is a Nabokovian paradox. Helpful pills do exist, but I am afraid of them. My habitual hallucinations are quite monstrously sufficient, thank Hades. Looking at it objectively, I have never seen a more lucid, more lonely, better balanced mad mind than mine."

Plumed Sunset. Sometimes his wife Véra awakes to furtive noises in the night. It is the mad mind at work shuffling the 3-by-5 cards on which Nabokov now does all his writing, and which he keeps under his pillow for nocturnal reference.

Staid during the season and stultifying off-season, Montreux is a natural haven for a genius with billowing dreams and a narrowing future. It is a two-street town, one low and one high, dumped at the foot of one Alp and facing another across Lake Geneva. Beyond the town is Byron's Castle of Chillon, the big tourist attraction of the area.

The hotel is a vast rococo establishment. In the off-season, the staff tends to outnumber the 20-odd guests. Most of these regulars are women of 60 or more—a couple of Americans, a few English, a stray Parisian countess or two. Twice a day they gather in the Winter Dining Room, a smallish chamber in the hotel basement, which, despite lavish importation of daffodils and red tulips, is a frightful miniature of desolation. All guests have their own tables; there is almost no talk. The Nabokovs have a cook and eat here only when they have visitors.

Upstairs, on the top floor, the Nabokovs' apartment is a warren of small rooms. Directly below is a room for their son Dmitri, who visits when he can take time from his operatic career in Milan. When he is in residence, the

tone-deaf father sings gleefully in the bathroom until Dmitri makes him stop.

In the summer, the hotel and town are crammed with tourists. It is time for the Nabokovs to leave. They do —to a different place every year, chosen for the local lepidoptera. This year it will be Lugano. Nabokov seemingly never tires of saying he may return to the U.S. "Especially in spring," he says, "I dream of going to spend my purple-plumed sunset in California, among the larkspurs and oaks and in the serene silence of her university libraries."

Nabokov has put aside fiction for the moment. "This was the hardest novel I ever wrote. Now I feel flat here," he says, patting his front, "as if I was delivered." Currently, he is translating all his Russian poems into English. But there is time to receive publishers bringing fat contracts. (Nabokov has remarked that he never cared about money until he had it, and now he does care. He left G. P. Putnam after many years and switched to McGraw-Hill partly because he heard that Putnam President Walter Minton had said: "Oh, Nabokov. He doesn't need money.") Véra, who helps with translation proofs, also does all the negotiating. Vladimir is charming and vague. Scholars come in increasing numbers, seeking enlightenment and hard fact. Nabokov booby-traps his repartee with esoteric references to his own work. (He has been known to reward an apt pupil by autographing his book with a sketch of a butterfly.) Lately there have even been Hollywood producers. "Keen minds, great enchanters," he says. There are also a few friends, including Vevey Neighbor James Mason, who recently dropped off a tie decorated in front with the poster picture of Uncle Sam saying "I want you!" The other side says, "- - - - Communism." Nabokov loves it.

In conversation, the man who has devoted a lifetime to literary discipline is so given to splutters and outbursts that he must reach for his handkerchief to wipe away the tears. Accuracy yields to hyperbole, especially when he is making game of other writers.

▶ MAILER: "I detest everything in American life that he stands for."

▶ BORGES: "At first, Véra and I were delighted by reading him. We felt we were on a portico, but we have learned that there was no house."

▶ ROTH: *"Portnoy's Complaint?* Dreadful. Conventional, badly written, corny. It's farcical—such things as the father's constipation. Even such a writer as Gore Vidal is more interesting."

The visitor produces the current *Playboy,* which contains an excerpt from *Ada.* The illustrations appall. "Awful! Comic! Dreadful! The artist needs anatomy lessons!" The handkerchief is seeing plenty of action. He starts composing cables and discarding them. Sample: "Either you are pessimistic or optimistic about Ada's bosoms."

CARL MYDANS

PLAYING CHESS WITH VÉRA

In the dining room, the Nabokovs are greeted by a maître d'hôtel, full of suggestions, and a flock of waiters. Selecting wine is a sure trap, as well as a mirror of marital misunderstanding of the sort that besets more ordinary couples.

Nabokov: Shall we have a Swiss red?

Véra: I don't like the Swiss especially, in particular the reds.

Nabokov (registering astonished innocence): In nine years, I have not known that you do not like Swiss wines, especially the reds.

Nabokov finally takes hold and orders, *mirabile dictu,* a Swiss red. Véra accepts, graceful in this as in everything. With finely drawn, strong features, alabaster skin, brilliant white hair, exquisite hands, she is a natural beauty. Their dinner conversation thrives on little disagreements, contrapuntal, and often not really resolved. In one exchange, Véra begins by explaining the mating ritual of the crested grebe, a grubby little bird which frequents the lake. They never touch, she says, waggling a delicate finger, but wiggle one foot back and forth. "No, no, no, no, no," says Vladimir, who has let this get by during a ticklish *entente* with a waiter. "They waggle their heads!", and he begins waggling vigorously.

Russian Scrabble. The meal ends, always the same way. Nabokov empties his pockets of silver, apparently at random. Alone of the regulars, he tips at each meal. "You don't know the laws that govern my life," he sighs humbly, looking heavenward. Now there is time for more serious talk, but Nabokov is reluctant to discuss The Novel.

"How can I talk about the novel," he asks, "when I don't know what a novel is? There are no novels, there are no writers, only individual books." To the suggestion that he is a sensual writer, he asks, "Isn't writing sensual? Isn't it about feeling? The spirit and the body are one. My concern is to capture everything—the pictures, the scene, the detail—exactly."

Véra has reduced the complexities of modern life to a shadow that occasionally crosses her husband's path. Yet her real role, one senses, is not in these labors, but as the only confidante of that "lucid, lonely mind." In the summer, they walk as much as 15 miles a day together. In the evening, they play out their Scrabble tournaments, often with a Russian set (he can run up a 500 score). The chess problems he eventually publishes are set first for her to solve. They like to read to each other. They reread *War and Peace* in a motel in Montana a few years ago, and sad to say, Tolstoy flunked. " 'He paled slightly,' or 'Andrei half smiled,' " quotes Vladimir condescendingly. "Really." Between Tolstoy and Nabokov it is clear that Véra would choose Nabokov, and the dedication she brings to him is total. Recently Nabokov heard that John Crowe Ransom, whose poetry he greatly admires, was rewriting many of his old poems at the age of 80 and dismantling their classic beauty. Vladimir turned to Véra and said quietly, "Never let me do that."

ALFRED APPEL COLLECTION

VLADIMIR & FAMILY AT VYRA, 1908*
Transmogrified version of a lost Eden.

bokov's experience and his literary creations is viewed by the author with scorn. Yet the soft, pervasive breath of *Paradise Lost* that whispers through *Ada* is more than an echo of Everyman's lost ardor. It is a transmogrified version of Nabokov's own lost private Eden in the Russia of his childhood. With his wealthy and gifted family, he lived in a town house in prerevolutionary St. Petersburg, and at Vyra, an idyllic, rambling country estate. For Nabokov, his two brothers and two sisters and their parents, life, especially at Vyra, seems to have been the living lesson in love, order and responsibility that all *ancien régime* childhoods should have been but so seldom were.

Flight from Home

Nabokov's tall, gentle father was an ex-Guards officer who could trace his family tree back to ancient Muscovite princes; he was also a professor of criminal law, and that rarity in Czarist Russia, a liberal politician as well. He held a seat in the first Russian Parliament. In 1906—when Vladimir was seven—Czar Nicholas II illegally dissolved the Parliament less than a year after its establishment. Nabokov's father signed a manifesto exhorting popular resistance to the move—and went to jail.

The sentence lasted only three months. Family life at Vyra began again, to last, apparently unshadowed, for nearly a decade more. In 1919 (young Vladimir was 20, and had recently inherited the equivalent of $2,000,000 from an uncle), the Bolshevik revolution forced the Nabokovs to begin their flight from Russia with only a few jewels and clothing. The real awareness of tragedy did not fully come home to them until 1922 in Berlin, when a night telephone call informed the family that their father was dead. He had been shot at a political rally, trying to protect another man from an assassin's bullets.

Nabokov's mother, Elena Ivanovna, who lived on in exile until 1939, read aloud to Vladimir in three languages. More important, she encouraged his attempts at poetry and nourished his susceptibility to sound and color. Mother and son shared a strong sense that certain colors and certain letters of the alphabet are related—*p* was an unripe apple green, for instance; *y's* and *u's* had a brassy "olive sheen." Matching colors and letters, Nabokov evolved a new private word, *Kzspygv,* which meant but did not spell "rainbow."

A series of nannies and governesses assisted his mother in teaching Vladimir to speak and read English (before he could read Russian). Tutors and coaches turned Nabokov into a competent boxer and a skilled tennis player—good enough, in fact, so that later, in straitened exile, he helped pay his way by giving lessons. More or less on his own he became an expert at chess problems and a collector of butterflies.

There was nothing soft or dreamy about Nabokov. He seems to have been an astonishingly disciplined, highly competitive, hopeless overperformer. His cousin Nicolas, a composer living in Hamburg, remembers Vladimir at 18 as tall, handsome and insufferably skillful at nearly everything—though he always smelled slightly of the ether he used to kill the specimen butterflies he caught. When Vladimir was enrolled in a liberal school expressly chosen by his father, he resented a master's suggestion that the Nabokov coachman deposit him several blocks away so he could arrive at class democratically afoot. A more galling comment, though, came from teachers who accused him of "showing off"—mainly for "peppering my Russian papers with English and French terms which came naturally to me."

The pursuit of butterflies and poetic perceptions provided Nabokov with a conception central to his existence—of art and science seen not as antagonists but as allies in capturing and celebrating the delightful, eccentric and always individual surfaces of life. Yet his feeling at times encompasses an almost mystic vision of beatitude. "This is ecstasy," he once wrote about standing alone in green woods among rare butterflies. "Behind the ecstasy is something else which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal."

Poetic Riffs

Entomologists still credit Nabokov as a serious lepidopterist. He described a dozen new variations of butterfly (mainly in the broad-ranging subfamily of blues), including the *Lycaeides melissa samuelis Nabokov*. His reports were models of precision, experts recall. But, in a prose necessarily dense with taxonomical terms, a few refreshing poetic riffs occurred: "From the opposite side of the distally twinned uncus," Nabokov wrote in a 1944 report describing genus *Lycaeides,* "and facing each other in the manner of the stolidly raised fists of two pugilists (of the old school) with the uncus hoods lending a Ku Klux Klan touch to the picture."

Nabokov's own grasp of the organic union between world and world, between observation and inspiration, goes back to a precise moment afield at Vyra, when at 15 he saw with clinical accuracy the genesis of his first (admittedly very bad) poem. "Without any wind blowing," he could still describe it 40 years later, "the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief—the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat . . . when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly start to drip all together in as crude an imitation of the recent downpour as the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one."

In the 1920's the young Nabokov, like other émigrés, was really a stateless person traveling on a special Nansen passport. He spent nearly 20 years among white Russian émigrés in Europe—mainly in Berlin. The role of nobleman in exile customarily inclines toward comic cliché or attenuated anguish. Nabokov's did neither. Yet any-

* Mother, Grandmother, with Elena and Olga, Father, Vladimir, Aunt and Sergei.

one who wonders what he survived need go no further than his earlier writing. Much of it is filled with details of émigré life. They are fondly presented. But many reveal the interminable, corrosive regret, the fulminating, the vaporous political argument, the feuding and backbiting that so often afflict émigré society.

The Gift, last and most compelling of the novels that Nabokov originally wrote in Russian, is a treasure house of exiliana. Nabokov's poet-protagonist Fyodor, a chess expert and indigent English tutor, is all too familiar with an exile writer's crippling cultural dependence on the erratic tastes of a handful of émigré critics. Coolly, he notes among his contemporaries such things as their half disapproving, half hopeful backward glances at their former homeland ("In Russia one observed the spread of abortions and the revival of summer houses"), their lingering monarchical pieties. "In her bedroom," Fyodor says, remembering an early mistress, "there was a little picture of the Tsar's family and a Turgenevian odor of heliotrope."

Nabokov had nothing but scorn for émigrés who lament their lost riches and real estate. He has never complained. He was able to go to Cambridge, where he studied foreign languages on a scholarship. But he was not happy. "The story of my college years in England," he says, "is really the story of my trying to become a Russian writer. I had the feeling that Cambridge and all its famed features—venerable elms, blazoned windows, loquacious tower clocks—were of no consequence in themselves but existed merely to frame and support my rich nostalgia."

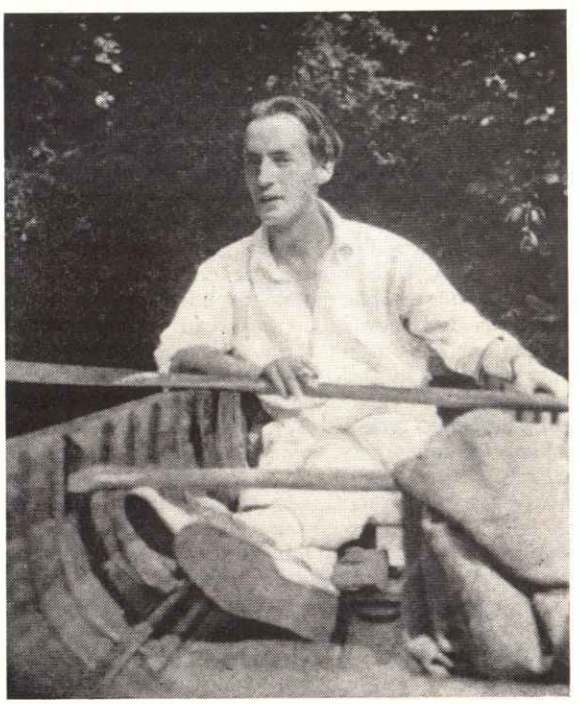
Thereafter, to make a bare living, Nabokov translated and wrote book reviews. He also tutored Germans in English and tennis, created and sold chess problems, and composed the first Russian-language crossword puzzles for a daily émigré paper.

Year after year, moreover, he wrote, usually at night, sometimes in the bathroom, where the light would disturb no one. By 1938 he had turned out nine novels, nine plays, and scores of stories and poems in Russian. But he had made almost no money and, apart from fellow white Russians, he was virtually unknown. Nearing 40, he had yet to write anything in English.

In the two decades between Cambridge and World War II, three pieces of great good fortune befell Nabokov. In 1925 he married Véra Evseena Slonim, the slim and beautiful daughter of a Jewish St. Petersburg industrialist also ruined by the revolution. In 1934 they had a son, Dmitri, an only child now studying opera in Italy. In 1939, having moved from Berlin to Paris to avoid the Nazis, Nabokov quite by chance received and accepted a proposal to lecture on Slavic languages at Stanford.

Life in California freed Nabokov of the need to write in the bathroom. But he needed all his astonishing powers of concentration and creative effort for the challenge now facing him. "It had taken me some 40 years to invent Russia and Western Europe," he wrote of the problem, "and now I was faced by the task of inventing America."

First at Stanford, then for seven years as a part-time lecturer in the Russian language at Wellesley, with side jobs as a lepidopterist in Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology (plus a few more tennis lessons), and finally as a professor at Cornell from 1948 to 1958, Nabokov studied America, as a colleague at Cornell puts it, like someone "in Madagascar observing the natives." In 1945 he became an American citizen. They occupied a succession of rented houses—more or less bivouacked in the quarters of a different absentee professor each year—partly for lack of cash, partly because Nabokov, having lost everything once, has absolutely no interest in acquiring physical possessions.



AT CAMBRIDGE, 1920

Neither comic cliché nor attenuated anguish.

As a teacher, Nabokov was provocative, tough, highhanded. At Wellesley, anxious to get off on a June butterfly hunt, he startled the registrar's office by wanting to turn in his grades before the final exam. He already knew, he said, exactly what each of his students was worth. When he did give an exam, it was demanding. Appalled by the constant cheating, he browbeat students to go to the toilet *before* the papers were passed out and pressed fresh pencils into the hands of examinees rather than let them go to the sharpener.

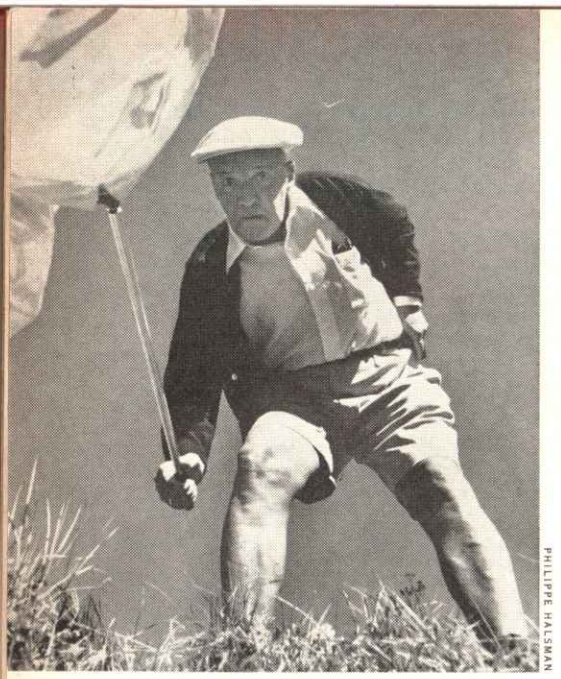
Despite such goings-on, at Cornell Nabokov's course in Modern Fiction (also known as Dirty Lit) became famous. Nabokov detested "old-fashioned human-interest criticism." It consists, he once reprovingly wrote old-fashioned, human-interest Critic Edmund Wilson, "of removing the characters from an author's imaginary world to the imaginary, but generally far less plausible, world of the critic, who then proceeds to examine these displaced characters as if they were 'real people.' " He refused to deal in such "dreadful things as trends," or offer traditional chatter about themes and schools of literature. Instead, he performed brilliant, instant autopsies on each book, taking it apart and flinging the pieces on the table, then reassembling them so that students for the first time grasped how a book is constructed. Once summing up the Soviet novel of social realism, he acted out the vibrant love story of two jackhammer operators who said I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-l-l-l-l-l-o-o-o-v-v-v-e-e-y-y-o-o-u-u-u to each other to the gyrations of their drills.

I Would Kiss Your Hand

In 1941, with the help of Nabokov's most influential American friend, Harvard Critic Harry Levin, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Nabokov's first novel written in English, was published. A haunting, accomplished and entirely Nabokovian novel about a man who loses his own identity trying to write the fictional biography of his lost brother, it appeared almost unnoticed. By the time he reached Cornell he had published *Bend Sinister* (1947), a study of a police state, parts of *Speak, Memory,* one of the most beautiful autobiographies in English. Yet he was barely known on campus as a man of letters, much less a literary genius.

Vladimir, acquaintances remember, was handsome, courtly, occasionally terribly amusing at parties. It was not for Nabokov, though, to commit the hilarious gaffes of his comic creation, the émigré Professor Timofey Pnin. Years of having to conform with dignity as an outsider had marked his manner. Mrs. Yvor Winters, widow of the critic, recalls that Nabokov would never kiss a woman's hand, as many other refugees did. "If I were in Russia," he once confided to her, "I would kiss your hand."

The Nabokovs entertained sparingly and cared only to see a few close friends. They were too busy. Besides, science (lepidopterology) was once again coming to the aid of Vladimir's art. Its handmaiden was technology in the form of a 1952 Buick, bought mainly to search for specimens in the West. Véra did the driving. Nabokov, with the security of a man who is good at nearly everything, easily concedes he cannot handle a car, adding generously, "There are some people who can refold maps, too, but I am not one of them." Every summer they coursed up



PHILIPPE HALSMAN

HUNTING BUTTERFLIES IN THE ALPS
Gratitude to whom it may concern.

and down Arizona, Utah, Wyoming and Oregon in search for the feeding grounds of Nabokov's beloved "blues." Between butterflies, Vladimir sat beside Véra jotting on 3 by 5 cards. His notes were about a man named Humbert Humbert. General Motors, so far as anyone knows, has paid scant heed to the historic fact that much of *Lolita* was written in a '52 Buick.

Mad Humbert's sad obsession with twelve-year-old Dolores Haze went off in the U.S. of the late '50s like a shot in church. At first, U.S. publishers were afraid to touch it. Véra was afraid Nabokov might lose his job at Cornell if they did. When it finally came out, reviewers, not yet used to such material in "serious literature," flew into rages of indignation and feigned boredom. New York *Times* Critic Orville Prescott, in particular, earned a gargoyle's niche in literary history by exclaiming, "Dull, dull, dull." But *Lolita* in due course was recognized as the masterpiece it is, and it made Nabokov rich, setting him free for the first time in his life, at 59, to write full time.

The first fruit of that freedom was *Pale Fire*. Spectacularly unread, it made no concessions to popular tastes while proving that a genius can write a brilliant novel consisting of a 999-line poem and scholarly comment on it. The book is a wintry, touching parable concerning two of Nabokov's persistent themes—the feeling of being unloved and the horror of willfully inflicted pain. *Pale Fire* elicited the high-water mark of Nabokov's critical acceptance. Perhaps the most perfect tribute came from Mary McCarthy, a critic rarely given to generosity or overstatement: this work, "half poem, half prose," she wrote, "is a creation of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth. Pretending to be a curio, it cannot disguise the fact that it is one of the great works of art of this century."

Today, Nabokov is a distant and revered personage safe in Switzerland; his judgments and comments are no less candid than ever. Along with a great many writers (*see box p. 82*), the informal list of his jocular pet hates includes such things as: progressive education; "serious" writers; confessions in the Dostoevskian manner; book reviewers, most of whom, Nabokov contends, "move their lips when reading"; people who say "excuse me" when they belch. Clearly, in an age practiced in the smooth piety of mock humility and slackly trained to believe that sincerity is an excuse for nearly everything, the public Nabokov must appear as some kind of cultural curmudgeon.

His views on what he regards as the two principal scourges of the century —Communism and Freudianism—are staunch. Nabokov sees both as dreadful infringements upon creative freedom. "The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me," he says. "My desires are modest. Portraits of the head of government should not exceed a postage stamp in size. No torture and no executions. No music, except coming through earphones or played in theaters."

Baconian Acrostics

Nabokov's novels, prefaces and discourses drip with scathing references to Freud. His basic objection to Freudian theories is that they slight the creative imagination by putting it in a sexual straitjacket and by insisting that dreams and images are determined mechanistically. "I reject completely the vulgar, shabby, fundamentally medieval world of Freud," he writes, "with its crankish quest for sexual symbols (something like searching for Baconian acrostics in Shakespeare's works) and its bitter little embryos spying from their natural nooks upon the love life of their parents." Nabokov may yet get his wish to see Shakespeare in heaven, laughing at Freud (in hell, naturally) for his bad interpretations of *Hamlet, Lear* and *Macbeth*. But how much comfort the scene would give him is debatable. From Nabokov's point of view, the electrical and chemical control of the brain, which seems to be rendering Freudian theory irrelevant, will hardly help the freedom of the individual imagination.

He has, as the phrase goes, no time for religion; yet his work is infused with a poetic sense of the sanctity of all life and with the faculty of a primitive animist—vestigial in modern man —of investing inanimate objects with life. He is inclined to deny that any utility, morality or heavy philosophical meaning should be attributed to his art. He dismisses such suggestions with the same scorn that he once made use of when a clubwoman asked him what butterflies were *for*. Nevertheless, certain deductions can be drawn from Nabokov's writing. In *Bend Sinister*, he composed a picture of crude, lumpish evil-in-power, and he put Yeats' much quoted "rough beast" into a Bolshevik or Nazi Bethlehem. Thus Prospero-Nabokov always knew Caliban, whether he was known as Hitler or Stalin or by some other name.

Still, the label that in one sense best suits Nabokov's practice and precept as a writer is art for art's sake. It is a school that has rarely fared well in public esteem, expecially in the U.S. *Fin de siècle* examples were customarily tainted by a kind of Wildean flounce, or could be made to seem so. More often the doctrine has been propounded to excuse artistic self-indulgence, sheer gush, or at best the refined outpourings of private feeling. None of these excesses apply to Nabokov. Few writers have brought to the practice of art for art's sake—or indeed to thematic literature—the enormous talent and discipline, the overwhelming intellectual grasp, the scrupulously objective range of eye and ear that Nabokov commands.

Distaste for the rational, plodding, message-ridden, rhetorical problem novel—which Nabokov has condemned for years—is now widespread. But the objection to the traditional novel is essentially negative, rising as it often does from despair about the possibilities of rational, orderly, middle-class society. Black comedies, happenings, novels without plots are on the whole grim experiments, and the laughter they offer is at best a kind of comic rictus.

Nabokov, who is essentially a prose poet, has always had something quite different in mind. "By poetry I mean the mysteries of the irrational perceived through rational words," he has explained. "True poetry of that kind provokes not laughter and not tears but a radiant smile of perfect satisfaction, a purr of beatitude—and a writer may well be proud of himself if he can make his readers, or more exactly some of his readers, smile and purr that way." When as a young man in Berlin, Nabokov decided to translate an English masterpiece into Russian, the book he chose was *Alice in Wonderland*. Perhaps he knew, even then, that the best way for an artist to triumph over time was to vanish like the Cheshire cat, leaving only a smile behind.

SUE LYON AS LOLITA
Only one magician in the park.