The Nabokov Canon

Javier Marías

THE MORE time that passes following Vladimir Nabokov's death in 1977, the more intriguing it becomes to read or re-read his books and realize that his body of work, which during his lifetime seemed very eccentric and unconventional—the product of far too many oddities (exile, nomadism, a change of language, multiple rewritings, self-translation)—is now considered one of the major canons of twentieth-century literature, a canon that belongs to no single nationality. When read fifteen or more years ago, the stories in *A Russian Beauty* might have seemed like brilliant anomalies: texts written between 1924 and 1940 during the European exile (spent mostly in Berlin) of a Russian polyglot and published in phantom magazines written by émigrés for other émigrés, who were perfectly aware that not only was their resonance field tiny, it was confined to a kind of shambolic ghetto, transient, shifting—or, rather, shrinking—and with little sense of solidarity. When re-read now, they can be seen as a coherent part of a collection of some sixty stories, which are as classic *and* as innovative as any contemporary reader could possibly wish for.

The second most striking thing about the thirteen stories included in this particular edition (*A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, Penguin, 1973) is their sheer variety: Nabokov was a writer with a distinctive, highly individual style, and his stories reveal an astonishing range of registers, almost as if he knew that the best short stories are those that belong to a specific genre, something that always seems to have a constraining effect on a novel, whereas with short stories it

lends an added tension and density. Even more striking, though, is that the sheer variety of registers creates the impression that Nabokov anticipated some of the trends or some of the authors who have subsequently overtaken him. Thus the inward-turning and almost plotless "Torpid Smoke" seems to presage Salinger; the chilling tawdriness of "A Dashing Fellow," Carver; the cold, crazed anxiety of the extraordinary "Ultima Thule," Bernhard; the wry humor of "Solus Rex," Dinesen. However, if the author himself also seems ever more of a classic, this is because many of the old masters in turn cast their shadow over his stories: Chekhov in the ironic pathos of "An Affair of Honor," Conrad in the febrile "Terra Incognita," Kafka in the casual cruelty of "The Potato Elf." Thus this apparently anomalous work suddenly emerges as a link to or the synthesis of many disparate trends, trends we had assumed to be either entirely unconnected or unrelated.

But do not deduce from this that *A Russian Beauty* is a kind of hodgepodge of hit-and-miss parodies or artificial games, of which Nabokov was so fond. Most of these stories do get straight to the point—that is, they deal with life or death matters through characters who are as enigmatic and as ordinary as those self-same life or death matters: the poor, furious cuckold who sees unwelcome death approaching precisely because he was foolish enough to reveal his condition as cuckold; the recluse who suddenly realizes that it is his reclusive nature which will bring about his death at the hands of his fellow men, who can tolerate neither his voluntary isolation nor his belated, timid incursion into a rudimentary social life; the frustrated and ingenuous writer who is willing to allow others and himself to be deceived because "old people must pay for their joys"; and then there's the terrifying Adam Falter, the man who has lost all interest in life, all compassion and all scruples, after a night spent in a hotel during which he accidentally solved "the riddle of the universe," a solution he will now never reveal to anyone else, having once been bullied into doing so by a psychiatrist, who dropped down dead as a consequence. Nabokov does not use genres as a kind of appoggiatura or divertimento, but, once inside a genre, he tells stories and draws characters who, as in all truly unforgettable stories, seem resolutely alive.□

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)