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Nabokov Interview

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Vladimir Nabokov: The Art of Fiction, No. 40

Interviewed by Herbert Gold

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Vladimir Nabokov lives with his wife Véra in the Montreux Palace Hotel in Montreux, Switzerland, a resort city on Lake Geneva which was a favorite of Russian aristocrats of the last century. They dwell in a connected series of hotel rooms that, like their houses and apartments in the United States, seem impermanent, places of exile. Their rooms include one used for visits by their son Dmitri, and another, the *chambre de debarras*, where various items are deposited—Turkish and Japanese editions of *Lolita*, other books, sporting equipment, an American flag.

Nabokov arises early in the morning and works. He does his writing on filing cards, which are gradually copied, expanded, and rearranged until they become his novels. During the warm season in Montreux he likes to take the sun and swim at a pool in a garden near the hotel. His appearance at sixty-eight is heavy, slow, and powerful. He is easily turned to both amusement and annoyance, but prefers the former. His wife, an unequivocally devoted collaborator, is vigilant over him, writing his letters, taking care of business, occasionally even interrupting him when she feels he is saying the wrong thing. She is an exceptionally good-looking, trim, and sober-eyed woman. The Nabokovs still go off on frequent butterfly-hunting trips, though the distances they travel are limited by the fact that they dislike flying.

The interviewer had sent ahead a number of questions. When he arrived at the Montreux Palace, he found an envelope waiting for him—the questions had been shaken up and transformed into an interview. A few questions and answers were added later, before the interview's appearance in the 1967 Summer/Fall issue of *The Paris Review*. In accordance with Nabokov's wishes, all answers are given as he wrote them down. He claims that he needs to write his responses because of his unfamiliarity with English; this is a constant seriocomic form of teasing. He speaks with a dramatic Cambridge accent, very slightly nuanced by an occasional Russian pronunciation. Spoken English is, in fact, no hazard to him. Misquotation, however, is a menace. There is no doubt that Nabokov feels as a tragic loss the conspiracy of history that deprived him of his native Russia, and that brought him in middle life to doing his life's work in a language that is not that of his first dreams. However, his frequent apologies for his grasp of English clearly belong in the context of Nabokov's special mournful joking: he means it, he does not mean it, he is grieving for his loss, he is outraged if anyone criticizes his style, he pretends to be just a poor lonely foreigner, he is as American "as April in Arizona."

Nabokov is now at work on a long novel that explores the mysteries and ambiguities of time. When he speaks of this book, his voice and gaze are those of a delighted and bemused young poet eager to get to the task.

INTERVIEWER

Good morning. Let me ask forty-odd questions.

VLADIMIR NABOKOV

Good morning. I am ready.

INTERVIEWER

Your sense of the immorality of the relationship between Humbert Humbert and Lolita is very strong. In Hollywood and New York, however, relationships are frequent between men of forty and girls very little older than Lolita. They marry—to no particular public outrage; rather, public cooing.

NABOKOV

No, it is not *my* sense of the immorality of the Humbert Humbert-Lolita relationship that is strong; it is Humbert's sense. *He* cares, I do not. *I* do not give a damn for public morals, in America or elsewhere. And, anyway, cases of men in their forties marrying girls in their teens or early twenties have no bearing on *Lolita* whatever. Humbert was fond of "little girls"—not simply "young girls." Nymphets are girl-children, not starlets and "sex kittens." Lolita was twelve, not eighteen, when Humbert met her. You may remember that by the time she is fourteen, he refers to her as his "aging mistress."

INTERVIEWER

One critic (Pryce-Jones) has said about you that "his feelings are like no one else's." Does this make sense to you? Or does it mean that you know your feelings better than others know theirs? Or that you have discovered yourself at other levels? Or simply that your history is unique?

NABOKOV

I do not recall that article; but if a critic makes such a statement, it must surely mean that he has explored the feelings of literally millions of people, in at least three countries, before reaching his conclusion. If so, I am a rare fowl indeed. If, on the other hand, he has merely limited himself to quizzing members of his family or club, his statement cannot be discussed seriously.

INTERVIEWER

Another critic has written that your "worlds are static. They may become

tense with obsession, but they do not break apart like the worlds of everyday reality." Do you agree? Is there a static quality in your view of things?

NABOKOV

Whose "reality"? "Everyday" where? Let me suggest that the very term "everyday reality" is utterly static since it presupposes a situation that is permanently observable, essentially objective, and universally known. I suspect you have invented that expert on "everyday reality." Neither exists.

INTERVIEWER

He does [names him]. A third critic has said that you "diminish" your characters "to the point where they become ciphers in a cosmic farce." I disagree; Humbert, while comic, retains a touching and insistent quality—that of the spoiled artist.

NABOKOV

I would put it differently: Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear "touching." That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl. Besides, how can I "diminish" to the level of ciphers, et cetera, characters that I have invented myself? One can "diminish" a biographee, but not an eidolon.

INTERVIEWER

E. M. Forster speaks of his major characters sometimes taking over and dictating the course of his novels. Has this ever been a problem for you, or are you in complete command?

NABOKOV

My knowledge of Mr. Forster's works is limited to one novel, which I dislike; and anyway, it was not he who fathered that trite little whimsy about characters getting out of hand; it is as old as the quills, although of course one sympathizes with *his* people if they try to wriggle out of that trip to India or wherever he takes them. My characters are galley slaves.

INTERVIEWER

Clarence Brown of Princeton has pointed out striking similarities in your work. He refers to you as "extremely repetitious" and that in wildly different ways you are in essence saying the same thing. He speaks of fate being the "muse of Nabokov." Are you consciously aware of "repeating yourself," or to

put it another way, that you strive for a conscious unity to your shelf of books?

NABOKOV

I do not think I have seen Clarence Brown's essay, but he may have something there. Derivative writers seem versatile because they imitate many others, past and present. Artistic originality has only its own self to copy.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think literary criticism is at all purposeful? Either in general, or specifically about your own books? Is it ever instructive?

NABOKOV

The purpose of a critique is to say something about a book the critic has or has not read. Criticism can be instructive in the sense that it gives readers, including the author of the book, some information about the critic's intelligence, or honesty, or both.

INTERVIEWER

And the function of the editor? Has one ever had literary advice to offer?

NABOKOV

By "editor" I suppose you mean proofreader. Among these I have known limpid creatures of limitless tact and tenderness who would discuss with me a semicolon as if it were a point of honor—which, indeed, a point of art often is. But I have also come across a few pompous avuncular brutes who would attempt to "make suggestions" which I countered with a thunderous "stet!"

INTERVIEWER

Are you a lepidopterist, stalking your victims? If so, doesn't your laughter startle them?

NABOKOV

On the contrary, it lulls them into the state of torpid security which an insect experiences when mimicking a dead leaf. Though by no means an avid reader of reviews dealing with my own stuff, I happen to remember the essay by a young lady who attempted to find entomological symbols in my fiction. The essay might have been amusing had she known something about Lepidoptera. Alas, she revealed complete ignorance, and the muddle of terms she employed proved to be only jarring and absurd.

INTERVIEWER

How would you define your alienation from the so-called White Russian refugees?

NABOKOV

Well, historically I am a "White Russian" myself since all Russians who left Russia as my family did in the first years of the Bolshevik tyranny because of their opposition to it were and remained White Russians in the large sense. But these refugees were split into as many social fractions and political factions as was the entire nation before the Bolshevist coup. I do not mix with "Black-Hundred" White Russians and do not mix with the so-called "bolshevizans," that is "pinks." On the other hand, I have friends among intellectual Constitutional Monarchists as well as among intellectual Social Revolutionaries. My father was an old-fashioned liberal, and I do not mind being labeled an old-fashioned liberal, too.

INTERVIEWER

How would you define your alienation from present-day Russia?

NABOKOV

As a deep distrust of the phony thaw now advertised. As a constant awareness of unredeemable iniquities. As a complete indifference to all that moves a patriotic *Sovietski* man of today. As the keen satisfaction of having discerned as early as 1918 (nineteen eighteen) the *meshchantsvo* (petty bourgeois smugness, Philistine essence) of Leninism.

INTERVIEWER

How do you now regard the poets Blok and Mandelshtam and others who were writing in the days before you left Russia?

NABOKOV

I read them in my boyhood, more than a half century ago. Ever since that time I have remained passionately fond of Blok's lyrics. His long pieces are weak, and the famous *The Twelve* is dreadful, self-consciously couched in a phony "primitive" tone, with a pink cardboard Jesus Christ glued on at the end. As to Mandelstam, I also knew him by heart, but he gave me a less fervent pleasure. Today, through the prism of a tragic fate, his poetry seems greater than it actually is. I note incidentally that professors of literature still assign these

two poets to different schools. There is only one school: that of talent.

INTERVIEWER

I know your work has been read and is attacked in the Soviet Union. How would you feel about a Soviet edition of your work?

NABOKOV

Oh, they are welcome to my work. As a matter of fact, the Editions Victor are bringing out my *Invitation to a Beheading* in a reprint of the original Russian of 1938, and a New York publisher (Phaedra) is printing my Russian translation of *Lolita*. I am sure the Soviet Government will be happy to admit officially a novel that seems to contain a prophecy of Hitler's regime, and a novel that condemns bitterly the American system of motels.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had contact with Soviet citizens? Of what sort?

NABOKOV

I have practically no contact with them, though I did once agree, in the early thirties or late twenties, to meet—out of sheer curiosity—an agent from Bolshevik Russia who was trying hard to get émigré writers and artists to return to the fold. He had a double name, Lebedev something, and had written a novelette entitled *Chocolate*, and I thought I might have some sport with him. I asked him would I be permitted to write freely and would I be able to leave Russia if I did not like it there. He said that I would be so busy liking it there that I would have no time to dream of going abroad again. I would, he said, be perfectly free to choose any of the many themes Soviet Russia bountifully allows a writer to use, such as farms, factories, forests in Fakistan—oh, lots of fascinating subjects. I said farms, et cetera, bored me, and my wretched seducer soon gave up. He had better luck with the composer Prokofiev.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself an American?

NABOKOV

Yes, I do. I am as American as April in Arizona. The flora, the fauna, the air of the western states, are my links with Asiatic and Arctic Russia. Of course, I owe too much to the Russian language and landscape to be emotionally

involved in, say, American regional literature, or Indian dances, or pumpkin pie on a spiritual plane; but I do feel a suffusion of warm, lighthearted pride when I show my green USA passport at European frontiers. Crude criticism of American affairs offends and distresses me. In home politics I am strongly antisegregationist. In foreign policy, I am definitely on the government's side. And when in doubt, I always follow the simple method of choosing that line of conduct which may be the most displeasing to the Reds and the Russells.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a community of which you consider yourself a part?

NABOKOV

Not really. I can mentally collect quite a large number of individuals whom I am fond of, but they would form a very disparate and discordant group if gathered in real life, on a real island. Otherwise, I would say that I am fairly comfortable in the company of American intellectuals who have read my books.

INTERVIEWER

What is your opinion of the academic world as a milieu for the creative writer? Could you speak specifically of the value or detriment of your teaching at Cornell?

NABOKOV

A first-rate college library with a comfortable campus around it is a fine milieu for a writer. There is, of course, the problem of educating the young. I remember how once, between terms, not at Cornell, a student brought a transistor set with him into the reading room. He managed to state that one, he was playing "classical" music; that two, he was doing it "softly"; and that three, "there were not many readers around in summer." I was there, a one-man multitude.

INTERVIEWER

Would you describe your relationship with the contemporary literary community? With Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, your magazine editors and book publishers?

NABOKOV

The only time I ever collaborated with any writer was when I translated with

Edmund Wilson Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri* for *The New Republic* twenty-five years ago, a rather paradoxical recollection in view of his making such a fool of himself last year when he had the audacity of questioning my understanding of *Eugene Onegin*. Mary McCarthy, on the other hand, has been very kind to me recently in the same *New Republic*, although I do think she added quite a bit of her own angelica to the pale fire of Kinbote's plum pudding. I prefer not to mention here my relationship with Girodias, but I have answered in *Evergreen* his scurvy article in the Olympia anthology. Otherwise, I am on excellent terms with all my publishers. My warm friendship with Katharine White and Bill Maxwell of *The New Yorker* is something the most arrogant author cannot evoke without gratitude and delight.

INTERVIEWER

Could you say something of your work habits? Do you write to a preplanned chart? Do you jump from one section to another, or do you move from the beginning through to the end?

NABOKOV

The pattern of the thing precedes the thing. I fill in the gaps of the crossword at any spot I happen to choose. These bits I write on index cards until the novel is done. My schedule is flexible, but I am rather particular about my instruments: lined Bristol cards and well sharpened, not too hard, pencils capped with erasers.

INTERVIEWER

Is there a particular picture of the world which you wish to develop? The past is very present for you, even in a novel of the "future," such as *Bend Sinister*. Are you a "nostalgist"? In what time would you prefer to live?

NABOKOV

In the coming days of silent planes and graceful aircycles, and cloudless silvery skies, and a universal system of padded underground roads to which trucks shall be relegated like Morlocks. As to the past, I would not mind retrieving from various corners of space-time certain lost comforts, such as baggy trousers and long, deep bathtubs.

INTERVIEWER

You know, you do not have to answer *all* my Kinbote-like questions.

NABOKOV

It would never do to start skipping the tricky ones. Let us continue.

INTERVIEWER

Besides writing novels, what do you, or would you, like most to do?

NABOKOV

Oh, hunting butterflies, of course, and studying them. The pleasures and rewards of literary inspiration are nothing beside the rapture of discovering a new organ under the microscope or an undescribed species on a mountainside in Iran or Peru. It is not improbable that had there been no revolution in Russia, I would have devoted myself entirely to lepidopterology and never written any novels at all.

INTERVIEWER

What is most characteristic of *poshlost* in contemporary writing? Are there temptations for you in the sin of *poshlost*? Have you ever fallen?

NABOKOV

“*Poshlost*,” or in a better transliteration *poshlost*, has many nuances, and evidently I have not described them clearly enough in my little book on Gogol, if you think one can ask anybody if he is tempted by *poshlost*. Corny trash, vulgar clichés, Philistinism in all its phases, imitations of imitations, bogus profundities, crude, moronic, and dishonest pseudo-literature—these are obvious examples. Now, if we want to pin down *poshlost* in contemporary writing, we must look for it in Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, and the journalistic generalities we all know. *Poshlost* speaks in such concepts as “America is no better than Russia” or “We all share in Germany’s guilt.” The flowers of *poshlost* bloom in such phrases and terms as “the moment of truth,” “charisma,” “existential” (used seriously), “dialogue” (as applied to political talks between nations), and “vocabulary” (as applied to a dauber). Listing in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious *poshlost*. Belonging to a very select club (which sports *one* Jewish name—that of the treasurer) is genteel *poshlost*. Hack reviews are frequently *poshlost*, but it also lurks in certain highbrow essays. *Poshlost* calls Mr. Blank a great poet and Mr. Bluff a great novelist. One of *poshlost*’s favorite breeding places has always been the Art Exhibition; there it is produced by so-called

sculptors working with the tools of wreckers, building crankshaft cretins of stainless steel, Zen stereos, polystyrene stinkbirds, objects trouvés in latrines, cannonballs, canned balls. There we admire the *gabinetti* wall patterns of so-called abstract artists, Freudian surrealism, roric smudges, and Rorschach blots—all of it as corny in its own right as the academic “September Morns” and “Florentine Flowergirls” of half a century ago. The list is long, and, of course, everybody has his *bête noire*, his black pet, in the series. Mine is that airline ad: the snack served by an obsequious wench to a young couple—she eyeing ecstatically the cucumber canapé, he admiring wistfully the hostess. And, of course, *Death in Venice*. You see the range.

INTERVIEWER

Are there contemporary writers you follow with great pleasure?

NABOKOV

There are several such writers, but I shall not name them. Anonymous pleasure hurts nobody.

INTERVIEWER

Do you follow some with great pain?

NABOKOV

No. Many accepted authors simply do not exist for me. Their names are engraved on empty graves, their books are dummies, they are complete nonentities insofar as my taste in reading is concerned. Brecht, Faulkner, Camus, many others, mean absolutely nothing to me, and I must fight a suspicion of conspiracy against my brain when I see blandly accepted as “great literature” by critics and fellow authors Lady Chatterley’s copulations or the pretentious nonsense of Mr. Pound, that total fake. I note he has replaced Dr. Schweitzer in some homes.

INTERVIEWER

As an admirer of Borges and Joyce you seem to share their pleasure in teasing the reader with tricks and puns and puzzles. What do you think the relationship should be between reader and author?

NABOKOV

I do not recollect any puns in Borges, but then I read him only in translation. Anyway, his delicate little tales and miniature Minotaurs have nothing in

common with Joyce's great machines. Nor do I find many puzzles in that most lucid of novels, *Ulysses*. On the other hand, I detest *Punningans Wake* in which a cancerous growth of fancy word-tissue hardly redeems the dreadful joviality of the folklore and the easy, too easy, allegory.

INTERVIEWER

What have you learned from Joyce?

NABOKOV

Nothing.

INTERVIEWER

Oh, come.

NABOKOV

James Joyce has not influenced me in any manner whatsoever. My first brief contact with *Ulysses* was around 1920 at Cambridge University, when a friend, Peter Mrozovski, who had brought a copy from Paris, chanced to read to me, as he stomped up and down my digs, one or two spicy passages from Molly's monologue, which, *entre nous soit dit*, is the weakest chapter in the book. Only fifteen years later, when I was already well formed as a writer and reluctant to learn or unlearn anything, I read *Ulysses* and liked it enormously. I am indifferent to *Finnegans Wake* as I am to all regional literature written in dialect—even if it be the dialect of genius.

INTERVIEWER

Aren't you doing a book about James Joyce?

NABOKOV

But not only about him. What I intend to do is publish a number of twenty-page essays on several works—*Ulysses*, *Madame Bovary*, Kafka's *Transformation*, *Don Quixote*, and others—all based on my Cornell and Harvard lectures. I remember with delight tearing apart *Don Quixote*, a cruel and crude old book, before six hundred students in Memorial Hall, much to the horror and embarrassment of some of my more conservative colleagues.

INTERVIEWER

What about other influences? Pushkin?

NABOKOV

In a way—no more than, say, Tolstoy or Turgenev were influenced by the pride and purity of Pushkin's art.

INTERVIEWER

Gogol?

NABOKOV

I was careful *not* to learn anything from him. As a teacher, he is dubious and dangerous. At his worst, as in his Ukrainian stuff, he is a worthless writer; at his best, he is incomparable and inimitable.

INTERVIEWER

Anyone else?

NABOKOV

H. G. Wells, a great artist, was my favorite writer when I was a boy. *The Passionate Friends, Ann Veronica, The Time Machine, The Country of the Blind*, all these stories are far better than anything Bennett, or Conrad or, in fact, any of Wells's contemporaries could produce. His sociological cogitations can be safely ignored, of course, but his romances and fantasias are superb. There was an awful moment at dinner in our St. Petersburg house one night when Zinaïda Vengerov, his translator, informed Wells, with a toss of her head: "You know, *my* favorite work of yours is *The Lost World*." "She means the war the Martians lost," said my father quickly.

INTERVIEWER

Did you learn from your students at Cornell? Was the experience purely a financial one? Did teaching teach you anything valuable?

NABOKOV

My method of teaching precluded genuine contact with my students. At best, they regurgitated a few bits of my brain during examinations. Every lecture I delivered had been carefully, lovingly handwritten and typed out, and I leisurely read it out in class, sometimes stopping to rewrite a sentence and sometimes repeating a paragraph—a mnemonic prod which, however, seldom provoked any change in the rhythm of wrists taking it down. I welcomed the few shorthand experts in my audience, hoping they would communicate the information they stored to their less fortunate comrades.

Vainly I tried to replace my appearances at the lectern by taped records to be played over the college radio. On the other hand, I deeply enjoyed the chuckle of appreciation in this or that warm spot of the lecture hall at this or that point of my lecture. My best reward comes from those former students of mine who, ten or fifteen years later, write to me to say that they now understand what I wanted of them when I taught them to visualize Emma Bovary's mistranslated hairdo or the arrangement of rooms in the Samsa household or the two homosexuals in *Anna Karenina*. I do not know if I learned anything from teaching, but I know I amassed an invaluable amount of exciting information in analyzing a dozen novels for my students. My salary as you happen to know was not exactly a princely one.

INTERVIEWER

Is there anything you would care to say about the collaboration your wife has given you?

NABOKOV

She presided as adviser and judge over the making of my first fiction in the early twenties. I have read to her all my stories and novels at least twice; and she has reread them all when typing them and correcting proofs and checking translations into several languages. One day in 1950, at Ithaca, New York, she was responsible for stopping me and urging delay and second thoughts as, beset with technical difficulties and doubts, I was carrying the first chapters of *Lolita* to the garden incinerator.

INTERVIEWER

What is your relation to the translations of your books?

NABOKOV

In the case of languages my wife and I know or can read—English, Russian, French, and to a certain extent German and Italian—the system is a strict checking of every sentence. In the case of Japanese or Turkish versions, I try not to imagine the disasters that probably bespatter every page.

INTERVIEWER

What are your plans for future work?

NABOKOV

I am writing a new novel, but of this I cannot speak. Another project I have

been nursing for some time is the publication of the complete screenplay of *Lolita* that I made for Kubrick. Although there are just enough borrowings from it in his version to justify my legal position as author of the script, the film is only a blurred skimpy glimpse of the marvelous picture I imagined and set down scene by scene during the six months I worked in a Los Angeles villa. I do not wish to imply that Kubrick's film is mediocre; in its own right, it is first-rate, but it is not what I wrote. A tinge of *poshlost* is often given by the cinema to the novel it distorts and coarsens in its crooked glass. Kubrick, I think, avoided this fault in his version, but I shall never understand why he did not follow my directions and dreams. It is a great pity; but at least I shall be able to have people read my *Lolita* play in its original form.

INTERVIEWER

If you had the choice of one and only one book by which you would be remembered, which one would it be?

NABOKOV

The one I am writing or rather dreaming of writing. Actually, I shall be remembered by *Lolita* and my work on *Eugene Onegin*.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel you have any conspicuous or secret flaw as a writer?

NABOKOV

The absence of a natural vocabulary. An odd thing to confess, but true. Of the two instruments in my possession, one—my native tongue—I can no longer use, and this not only because I lack a Russian audience, but also because the excitement of verbal adventure in the Russian medium has faded away gradually after I turned to English in 1940. My English, this second instrument I have always had, is however a stiffish, artificial thing, which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop. An old Rolls-Royce is not always preferable to a plain jeep.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think about the contemporary competitive ranking of writers?

NABOKOV

Yes, I have noticed that in this respect our professional book reviewers are veritable bookmakers. Who's in, who's out, and where are the snows of yesteryear. All very amusing. I am a little sorry to be left out. Nobody can decide if I am a middle-aged American writer or an old Russian writer—or an ageless international freak.

INTERVIEWER

What is your great regret in your career?

NABOKOV

That I did not come earlier to America. I would have liked to have lived in New York in the thirties. Had my Russian novels been translated then, they might have provided a shock and a lesson for pro-Soviet enthusiasts.

INTERVIEWER

Are there significant disadvantages to your present fame?

NABOKOV

Lolita is famous, not I. I am an obscure, doubly obscure, novelist with an unpronounceable name.

Author photograph by Jerry Bauer.

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