



A great catch? Nabokov out on a butterfly hunt

BOOKS

The magician's doubts

The irritating genius of Vladimir Nabokov.
By Leo Robson

Pale Fire

Vladimir Nabokov

Penguin Modern Classics, 256pp, £12

Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play

Thomas Karshan

Oxford University Press, 328pp, £55

The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness

Lila Azam Zanganeh

Allen Lane, 256pp, £20

Vladimir Nabokov professed to hate most forms of criticism but he owed, and owes, a great deal to critics. When he arrived in the US in 1940, having spent time in Athens, London, Cambridge, Berlin and Paris after fleeing Russia in 1919, he found a kind and immediately helpful friend in Edmund Wilson, at that time literary editor of the *New Republic*. After the publication of his third novel written in English, *Lolita* (1958), he benefited from the passionate advocacy of two professors at Columbia

College: Lionel Trilling and F W Dupee. And when Nabokov's work became difficult in other, less actionable ways, with *Pale Fire* (1962), it was a long review by Mary McCarthy that offered enlightenment where there might otherwise have been bafflement. Nabokov, keen as ever to assert not just authorship but ownership of his work, disclaimed responsibility for 90 per cent of McCarthy's "symbols".

Nabokov did less well by critics when he retreated from fiction-writing in favour of heading up Nabokov Inc. Writing in 1966, John Updike complained:

He has moved to Switzerland and, instead of composing the delightful, devilish, and unimaginable successor to *Pale Fire*, fusses with backward-looking projects such as ushering his minor Russian works into English, defending in Encounter his sumptuous but ungratefully received version of *Eugene Onegin*, and translating *Lolita* into Russian, a virtually posthumous manoeuvre not likely to win much gratitude either.

When Nabokov finally produced the longed-for successor, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1970), it was replete, Updike said, with "bearish parentheses" and "garlicky puns". But it is only living writers who are judged by their latest work, and as soon as Nabokov died in 1977, all was forgiven. So long as there were cloud-capped peaks, who cared about ponging puns? "What matters now," Updike wrote in his obituary tribute "Vale, VN", "is that the least of his writings offered a bygone sort of delight... [H]e leaves behind a resplendent oeuvre."

Some years after Nabokov's death, the English academic Michael Wood, a one-time Columbia colleague of Trilling and Dupee, took a somewhat different approach, making clear in his book *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* that the confident, lordly writer worshipped by some readers didn't interest him at all. This self-liberating gesture allows the rest of us our impatience: with, say, Nabokov's unargued dismissal of writers who seek to do anything other than enchant ("I detest Plato"); with his habit of making his own work – and the literature he loves – sound philosophically incurious and morally null; and with his breath-wasting contempt, also displayed by to his most myopic narrators, for old ladies, advertising, philistinism, playwrights and Freud.

For my part, I like the Nabokov who joked, in a letter to Wilson, that by the time he started writing in English, he was too old to change "Conradically" from the author of his eight Russian novels; but not the Nabokov who followed it with the parenthesis "(that is a good one)". I like the Nabokov who noticed, in a poem addressed to Wilson, that Proust, whose languorous work he loved, "anagrimed" with "stupor"; but not the Nabokov who noticed that T S Eliot, whom he deemed "pretentious" and "second-rate", could be rearranged to make "toilets". Christopher Ricks, exhibiting none of Nabokov's fear of repetition, wrote in the *New Statesman* of his "condescending heartlessness", "facetious provocativeness", "patiently patrician calm" and "icy artifice" – sufficient reason, it might seem, to steer clear of Nabokov altogether.

But there is, as Wood showed, a second writer who "finds the humanity the first writer was so keen to hide" – a writer who, having lost his homeland, his father, his mother, his brother and his native tongue, understood "deprivation, marginality and helplessness". It was the magician's doubts, and not his tricks, that produced the American novels, a run of successes starting with *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and ending not with *Pale Fire* but with *Invitation to a Beheading*, which Wood calls "a long, brilliant novel about the possibility of happiness" – a book that contains "marvellous puns... as well as lamentable ones". Wood doesn't pretend that Nabokov is perfect, but having voiced his

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qualms, he directs his attention to the doubtful, risk-taking writer he loves. (With dead writers we admire, griping is a prelude to gratitude, whereas with living ones it tends to be the other way around.)

Wood's book, sadly now out of print, is an academic study, but one published by trade press and intended for the common reader. It is a split personality that has now spawned two pretenders. Thomas Karshan works his way scrupulously, systematically and perhaps a little soberly through Nabokov's work in *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play*. Lila Azam Zanganeh, in *The Enchanter: Nabokov and Happiness*, has written a swoony (or drunken) love letter to him, justly described as "joyful" by Orhan Pamuk and Salman Rushdie. Neither author appears to have met a Nabokov they do not like, but they have subtly different emphases, and though they both make space for *Lolita*, each pays most attention to a novel the other essentially ignores.

For Karshan, "play" is at once the governing principle of Nabokov's work and its "signature idea", but not a key or secret. Karshan is wary, as Nabokov was, of imagining that everything can be unlocked, connected, explained away. This wariness serves him well throughout his penetrating, omniscient book, but it restricts the extent to which he can splash around in its main case study, *Pale Fire*, a novel not just full of games (chess, ping-pong, word-golf) but characterised by alphabetical, anagrammatical, and onomastic play – not to mention allusion, the calling into play (though not naming) of other texts.

The novel comprises a foreword written by an academic, Charles Kinbote; a poem, in rhyming couplets, by his erstwhile neighbour and colleague at Wordsmith College in Appalachia, the recently deceased poet John Shade; Kinbote's critically inept commentary on the poem; and his erratic and eccentric index. Kinbote had been under the impression that the poem would incorporate his reminiscences of Zembla, the northern land of which he is exiled king, and is surprised to find an autobiographical poem about Shade's childhood and his daughter, who killed herself. Kinbote's commentary attempts to find traces of the Zemblan *donnée*, but even the mention of "Zembla" has a parallel explanation in Shade's being a scholar of Alexander Pope, who used the word in his poetry.

Karshan wants to present *Pale Fire* as a game (or *lusus ingeni*) in the tradition of Pope's *The Dunciad* rather than a puzzle Nabokov has set for the reader to solve. But there are things about *Pale Fire* that readers may wish to pursue in a spirit akin to detection. Karshan wrongly summarises these concerns as "the notorious critical debate over whether Kinbote invented Shade or Shade invented Kinbote", and moves abruptly on.



How did you find time to write your new book, *Made in Britain*?

I cheated. I had a nice helper, Tom Bromley, who wrote quite a bit of it. And the *Today* programme leaves you a lot of space to do other things. The hours are very intense and unsocial, but they do give you most of the day to do your own stuff. The third answer to the question is that I haven't really had time to do it, so I've slightly overstretched myself.

Did you enjoy writing it?

I enjoyed it when I knew what I wanted to say. I really didn't enjoy it when I didn't know what I was trying to say. It's amazing, if you know what you want to say, how fast it is to write. So some of the chapters were written in – and I'm not joking – a day and a half, maybe two. Others took the best part of a month.

Did writing about companies such as BAE in glowing terms make you feel uneasy?

It only made me uneasy in the sense that I didn't want to alienate large numbers of readers by giving them an example to which they will say: "Well, we don't like that example, so your whole argument must be wrong." I'm not trying to be judgemental about the things I'm looking at. I'm just trying to say that, actually, we have quite a big capacity in this country to make things, to sell things and to earn money.

Were you tempted to take a moral view?

I didn't really feel I had anything to say on that. I mean, I see both sides of the argument. Do I think it would be better if BAE Systems hadn't been caught up in a Serious Fraud Office inquiry, paying fines and so on? Well, of course, and I suspect BAE also feels that. Do I think BAE Systems should be taken out of existence? No.

What makes you optimistic about British manufacturing?

Because the economy has taken a turn upmarket over the past few decades. And that wasn't some insane dereliction of our industrial heritage. That was a perfectly sensible move, given the way the world had changed. Did it work? Not quite. We only paid 95 per cent of the bills, not 100 per cent

THE BOOKS INTERVIEW

Evan Davis

of them. So we've got to refine the model significantly to make sure we're paying 100 per cent of the bills.

Why is there such a discrepancy between most people's attitude towards the economy – which is very bleak – and your more hopeful argument?

The discrepancy is mainly around the time horizon. I don't want to sound like "chirpy Evan" who's just bouncing around with his unrealistic views and doesn't understand what's going on. The bleakness is, I think, on a five-year horizon – and it has to do with us having to make a number of very painful adjustments.

Do people want to read an optimistic book about the economy right now?

That is a real worry. We're at a critical juncture, post-financial crisis. The dust is settling, so this is a good time for the nation to ask what we did right, what we did wrong, what we did too much of and what we didn't do enough of.

Did you ever feel that you had to self-censor what you were writing?

What comes with a job as a staff member of the BBC is a certain self-censoring that you get utterly used to. You don't say everything you think. You hold back on some things. You phrase them in a way that is open-minded – I'm not talking about everything, but about things that might have some impact on partisan debate.

One interesting debate is whether government is too big and is a burden on the economy or not. Is the private sector carrying such a big burden of government that it can't export and it can't invest? I made a decision not to go there.

Is having to be so careful a frustration of working for the BBC?

Not if you're an open-minded person. I swing both ways. I can see things from a kind of conservative point of view and from a more socially liberal or left-wing point of view. The *Today* programme gives you access to the entire chattering class of the United Kingdom, for several hours a week.

So it's not a constraint I think about. Everyone has constraints in their work. This is not a serious one. ●

Interview by Duncan Robinson
Evan Davis's *"Made in Britain"* is published by Little, Brown (£18.99)

The Critics

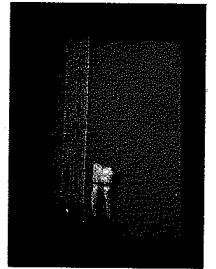
mistaken identity in Hamlet's failed attempt to murder Claudius: "that it turns out to be Polonius does not alter the fact of Hamlet having gone and done it".

And yet *Hamlet* is as much about suicide as regicide. Kinbote's note to Shade's line about his daughter, "She took her poor young life", in which he talks about "the terrible sin implicit in self-destruction", plays on – and plays in – Hamlet's line about the Everlasting having fixed his canon against self-slaughter. After considering some methods of suicide by falling, Kinbote says: "The ideal drop is from an aircraft, your muscles relaxed, your pilot puzzled, your packed parachute shuffled off" – this is the best way to shuffle off your mortal coil. Karshan's Nabokovian take on Nabokov tends to see play as an end in itself, a theme of its own; but in *Pale Fire*, as in *Lolita*, it is just one of the tragedian's tools.

Lila Azam Zanganeh doesn't show much interest in *Pale Fire*, or critical investigation. She prefers to bask in Nabokov – or "V N", as she calls him – and to trill about his exotic vocabulary, sweetly turned details, the contagious bliss of his work. As an appreciator more inclined to exclaim than explain, to savour than ponder, it isn't surprising that her affections rush towards *Ada*, another novel full of *Hamlet* (but I won't go there). It is a puckish and delirious saga, earnest and spoofy, decade-skipping and continent-hopping, and narrated in the third person by its two protagonists, the aristocratic sibling-lovers Van and Ada, who fall in love in 1880s Antiterra. Antiterra is an alternative universe where electricity has been replaced by hydraulics (but where John Updike still exists), and where our own Terra is a rumoured otherworld or afterlife.

Ada is a 500-page bagatelle, Nabokov's equivalent to Flaubert's dream project of writing "a book about nothing". But between the planished and singing English, and the recourse to Russian, French and Italian words and phrases, it also fulfils Nabokov's own "desiderata": "style and a rich vocabulary".

It is, in other words, all play, which might make Karshan's apparent indifference to it strange, if it weren't a book as likely to make any reader groan as grin. I confess that I do grin at the allusions and the tongue-twisters, at the prescient use of "googled" and "Chunnel"; at the translation parodies (where Lear's "Never" becomes "N'est vert"); at joke-phrases such as "the collected works of unrecollected authors" and "prebrandial' brandy" and "assassin pun" (itself a pun, on *pointe assassine*); at the inspired and/or deranged musings on time and immortality, and at such Antiterra conceits as the production of Chekhov's *Four Sisters* in which one sister is mentioned but never shown, "so that the title of the play might have been *The Three Sisters*". I ardently adore *Ada* (and all its malodorous verbal play), but I recoil



Photographs from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Left to right: Nezir Nukić, forester and roadbuilder, Živinice; Zumra Mehić, homemaker, Kladanj; Bajazit Mehić, mortal remains,

PICTURE BOOK OF THE WEEK

Tuzla; Ahmedin Mehić, tooth sample used for DNA matching, Srebrenica. These images are taken from *A Living Man Declared Dead and Other Chapters* by Taryn Simon (Mack Books, £80).

Over a four-year period, Simon, an award-winning American photographer, travelled the world from Bosnia to Brazil recording "bloodlines and their related stories"

from the view – which Zanganeh shares with the king of Nabokovophiles, Brian Boyd – that such a self-delighted, self-cancelling book should be portrayed as the quintessence of Nabokov, or promoted as his summa.

Nabokov described his "ideal readers" as "little Nabokovs" and he has got what he wanted, alas. Michael Wood is an exception: he distinguishes Nabokov's Nabokov from "my Nabokov" and touches on subjects (such as philosophy and ethics) that would have made the writer ill. Karshan and Zanganeh are what Nabokov, with his devotion to diminutives ("sermonet", "criticule"), might have called "Nabokovlets". By relying so much on the lectures, articles and interviews, they produce accounts capable of finding only those complexities that have a licence or counterpart in Nabokov's utterances. The Nabokovlets consider Nabokov's work in terms of his own grateful, gleeful vocabulary (enchantment, inspiration, bliss) rather than Wood's "pity" and "loss".

The popular image of the historical Nabokov, brandishing a chess piece in one hand and a butterfly net in the other, has expanded over the years, making of him a lovable old wag, uxorious and avuncular, the mischievous master of Montreux – where we might instead have a mighty modernist unembarrassed by his own disquiet. The writer whose American novels exposed – through Humbert's quest to relive

a boyhood love affair, Kinbote's failure to find a deathless "Arcady" in Appalachia, and Antiterra's vision of an idyllic or Edenic Terra – the folly of his own belief in consolation, serenity and paradise, should not be relied on for a sober self-portrait.

Asked to comment on Alain Robbe-Grillet's claims that his work was free of "psychology", Nabokov replied that they were "preposterous": "His fiction is magnificently poetical and original, and the shifts of levels, the interpenetration of successive impressions and so forth belong to psychology – psychology at its best."

Behind this statement is, partly, Nabokov's dislike of manifestos ("those dodoes" that "die with the dadas"). But there is also the implied belief, for all his own preposterous claims about the all-controlling author, that readers can cleave to whatever characteristics they wish – just as he found in Proust a fairy tale, in *Mansfield Park* a fairy tale, in *Don Quixote* a fairy tale, he found in Robbe-Grillet a magnificent Nabokovian writer unrecognisably different from the repulsive *nouveau romancier*. And so we can imagine or discover our own Nabokovs – figures no less real for deviating so wildly from the Authorised Version set down by this incorrigible, irritating man, whose perversity outweighed everything but his genius. ●

Leo Robson is the New Statesman's lead fiction reviewer