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Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov (review)

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devout Muslim who had been jailed for five years because her religious affiliations were not sanctioned by the Islamacists in power, arrives first. After she is convinced that there are no men in the house, Mashid agrees to take off her black robe, revealing a white shirt with a huge yellow butterfly embroidered on it. Nafisi asks, “Did you wear this in honor of Nabokov?” The yellow and white shirt repeats the yellow and white daffodils Mashid has already presented to Nafisi as a housewarming gift. Nabokov’s butterfly signals the transition from the bleak world outside to the colored interior of the apartment and the radiant gift that Nabokov and other writers will bestow over the course of the many weeks the group is together.

Reading Lolita in Tehran is part literary criticism, part personal memoir, part political commentary. Its popularity may be a matter of timing: the subject is topical, and the story of rebellious women refusing to succumb to oppression appealing. But the real charm of this book is in the many small details, such as the green gate at the entrance to the university in front of which the women had to be questioned and searched before they could enter, or the adhesive tape stuck to fortify the windows during the bombing in the Iran-Iraq war, which evoke a reality that is both familiar and alien at the same time. Nafisi, while still teaching at the University of Tehran, wrote the full length *Antiterra: A Critical Reading of Vladimir Nabokov’s Novels*. She has studied Nabokov deeply, understanding that human imagination and curiosity are prepolitical, that the act most subversive to any political system is to think independently and be true to one’s dreams, that even the oppressor cannot always be reduced to his caricature. Borrowing from the rhetoric of Mike Gold and others who sought, however unsuccessfully or misguidedly, to overthrow societal unfairness by direct political action, Nafisi posted this directive at the website entrance to the Dialogue Project, an online forum she conducts to discuss Democracy in the Middle East: “Book Lovers of the World Unite!” For Nafisi, and maybe even Nabokov, good readers really can “save the world.”

Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds. *Torpid Smoke: The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Studies in Slavic Literature and Poetics, vol. 35. Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000. 246 pp. ISBN 90-420-0719-2.

Review by Mary Bellino, South Hadley, Massachusetts

Are there individual Nabokov stories to which his readers return again and again, as we do to *Lolita* or *Pale Fire*, seeking to re-enter their seductive fictional universes, to re-engage with their wonders and mysteries? Perhaps

not—but certainly Nabokov’s critics have found the stories worthy of prolonged attention. The number of critical works on the stories is about on a par with *Ada* and *Pale Fire*, just ahead of *Pnin* and quite a bit behind *Lolita*. The collective index to *The Nabokovian*, for example, lists roughly fifty articles and notes on various stories, sixty on *Pale Fire*, fifty on *Ada* (not counting Boyd’s “Annotations”), and thirty on *Pnin*. The Zembla bibliography lists about ninety items on the stories, including three books. So Kellman and Malin are not quite correct when they remark (no doubt recycling a phrase from their book proposal) that the stories have been “slighted” by critics (1). But that is neither here nor there; to the true Nabokovian there is no such thing as too much critical attention, especially if, as is the case here, the result contains some worthwhile additions to the secondary literature. While falling short of the mark of excellence set by Gennady Barabtralo and Charles Nicol’s *A Small Alpine Form*, *Torpid Smoke* contains several valuable articles—and one that is a pearl beyond price.

The centerpiece of the volume is J. E. Rivers’ discussion of the original French version of “Mademoiselle O.” Rivers, whose witty Olympian overviews of Nabokov scholarship appear from time to time in the journal *Review*, is a fine writer and a perceptive critic; his eye, like that of a Zen artist, sees the whole and all of its parts simultaneously. Over the course of nearly fifty pages he traces the story in its successive incarnations, “from French to English to Russian to English” (94), and shows convincingly that the Mademoiselle of the French version (first written in 1936 for a reading at the Brussels Pen Club) is a far more sympathetic character than the Mademoiselle we know from *Nine Stories* or the various versions of *Conclusive Evidence/Speak, Memory/Drugie berega*. Indeed, the early Mademoiselle has unmistakable affinities with Nabokov himself: she is in exile, ignorant of the language being spoken around her (Nabokov was of course living in Berlin in 1936), “suspendue toute seule dans la vide.” As Rivers remarks, “we not only see but feel that her story is a concentrated version of his” (104). The meat of the article is a long analysis of the French text, with accompanying English translations and excerpts from the later English and Russian versions, concluding with some observations on Nabokov’s metaphysics and his evolving view of the hereafter. Then the camera is brought closer for an examination of what Rivers calls “the o hologram”—the preponderance of “o” sounds in the written and spoken French of the story. These recall both Mademoiselle O herself and the round mouth one makes when pronouncing these round sounds, leaving the reader “no choice but to act the part of Mademoiselle, especially when the reader reads Mademoiselle reading” (124–25). Rivers also extends his discussion to include a survey of the many governess figures in Nabokov’s oeuvre, from the very early “Easter Rain”

to the figure's "nadir" in *Ada*, and he finds that the trend is a "cooling ... that ends at last in disgust" (96). Why so? A friend of Rivers' (or so he claims) suggested to him that perhaps Mademoiselle had "sexually initiated the boy Nabokov" (96). In his haste to distance himself from this unpalatable theory, Rivers fails to note that this is precisely what happens to the boy Van Veen (*Ada* 151, 545) in the novel that lays the governess figure to rest at last. Although I don't encourage him to pursue that particular chimera, I wish Rivers would give us more of his subtle readings of Nabokov's evolving texts.

It would be a miracle indeed if the other articles in the collection came up to the Rivers standard. The second-longest article, by Maxim Shrayer, explores *l'affaire Shiskov* in extensive detail. It is quite good, especially on Nabokov's poetry, but also quite familiar, because the article appeared as a chapter in Shrayer's book *The World of Nabokov's Stories*, published the previous year (and brazenly mentioned by the editors in their introduction). Should Kellman and Malin have asked Shrayer to withdraw the article once his book was released? Of course—but they were probably loath to do so, given that it comprises about a sixth of the volume. Should they refund a sixth of the book's purchase price to anyone who asks?

Of the shorter articles, only three attempt to trace a theme through even part of Nabokov's thirty-year career as a short-story writer. Barbara Wyllie looks at a number of stories written between 1934 and 1951, including "The Circle," "Trepid Smoke," "The Return of Chorb," "Details of a Sunset," "Perfection," and "The Vane Sisters," arguing persuasively that Nabokov's project was to "overcome the regressive, destructive force of time" (6) through the thematic use of memory and dream. Her discussion of "Chorb" is especially good, although I believe she is mistaken to see behind the story's unambiguous allusions to the Ovidian Orpheus/Eurydice tale a reference to the shadowy doctrines of Orphic "religion," a very different proposition. Julian Connolly treats only the very early stories, from "The Wood Sprite" (1921) through "A Nursery Tale" (1926), but his focus, Nabokov's approach to the supernatural, allows him to look forward to the more subtle handling that "giv[es] Nabokov's mature fiction its unmistakable depth and resonance" (21). Not surprisingly, he finds that Nabokov's touch becomes lighter through the 1920s, as he begins to leave behind "the winged demons and rattling skeletons" of the earliest stories and instead "imbue the mundane with magic" (33). Connolly's discussion also turns up some early instances of specific Nabokovian narrative strategies, such as the technique, borrowed perhaps from early practitioners of the "tale of the fantastic," of crafting situations in which the reader cannot determine whether a given event is a product of the narrator's imagination

(23). R.H.W. Dillard examines just two stories of the 1920s, "Christmas" and "The Christmas Story," prefacing his discussion with a lengthy explication of the 1925 poem "The Mother ("Mat"). Taken together, these three works show the young writer's handling of the Christ story (in both exoteric and esoteric variants) as he tries, successfully in Dillard's view, to turn traditional material into "Nabokov stories, but ... also Nabokov Christmas stories" (37). Like Rivers and Connolly, Dillard has been thinking and writing about Nabokov for many decades, and it shows: his touch is sure and his analyses well worth reading.

The remaining articles concentrate on single stories. Nassim Ballestrini brings an examination of Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata" and its background to bear on Nabokov's "Music." She shows how Nabokov "implicitly realizes Tolstoy's project of uniting music, literature, and painting, but with an aesthetic rather than a moralistic intent" (72). Nabokov, who had no ear for music and often found himself as bored and irritated at concerts as he was by Tolstoy's didacticism, preferred to emphasize "art forms that celebrate the powers of human consciousness" (73). Another art form, film, is adduced in "The Assistant Producer," the subject of Christian Moraru's attempt to locate the postmodern turn in Nabokov's fiction. Moraru argues that the story "playfully enacts the erosion" between the fictive and the real by splicing the two together; the result is "a true watershed in Nabokov's career" (174). While the article's theoretical baggage (and numerous typographical errors) make it rather heavy going, Moraru's explication of the story's interplay of film and history seems sound enough.

In a charmingly self-deprecating footnote, Victor Strandberg claims that his book on William James has found few readers since its publication in 1981. Perhaps his essay here will win the book a fractionally larger audience, for Strandberg traces the links between James's work (which Nabokov certainly knew well) and Nabokov's, in particular the story "That in Aleppo Once ...," with enlightening results. As one would expect, he also makes the Shakespearean connection, giving us several good pages on the interaction of *Othello* and "Aleppo" as well as a general consideration of the affinities between the two writers, not the least of which is the "theme of isolation" that permeates the work of both (200). In contrast, both Brian Walter and Linda Wagner-Martin present Nabokov the social and political critic. Walter reads "A Forgotten Poet" against the background of Nabokov's well-known gripe with American liberals' view of the Bolsheviks. His aim is to shift critical focus, which has traditionally been on the story's narrator, back to the story as a whole, and he argues that the "pleasure both narrator and author take in

describing the delicious absurdity of Perov's revival ... springs from Nabokov's indirectly political intention" (205). The specifics of this delicious absurdity, as in the risible scene of Perov being ejected by the chairman of the committee convened to honor him, have their roots in unlikely soil: Dostoevsky's "wonderful flair for comedy mixed with tragedy" (*LRL* 122), which, as Walter shows, Nabokov genuinely admired. Wagner-Martin offers a feminist reading of "The Vane Sisters" that foregrounds the issue of professor-student romances, a phenomenon that has experienced a complete reversal of social sanction since the story was written in the 1950s. Even though it is only recently that such relationships have been recognized as unethical, Wagner-Martin argues that Nabokov must have been aware of the "supercilious and often merciless treatment that ... male college professors were capable of meting out to their lovers—women who were, in some cases, their undergraduate students" (230). Reading both the narrator and D. against this background, she contrasts their obtuse self-centeredness with the gentleness and artistry of the sisters visible beneath the narrator's self-serving account. Rightly concluding that Nabokov's sympathies lie with Sybil and Cynthia, and noting the "VN" concealed in their last name, she wonders if he intended to draw an analogy between "his own marginalized position within an American university [and] the woman's position in a heterosexual love relationship" (242).

Whether from modesty or some less noble motive, the two editors are represented by the two shortest pieces in the volume, coming in at just nine pages each. Steven Kellman takes us through "Breaking the News" at brisk clip. First, following a hint offered by Nabokov, he sets the story against "Signs and Symbols." The comparison is fruitful: the two stories work in similar ways to engage the reader with clues and images that foretell a tragic ending, but Kellman doesn't quite see that the underinterpreting Eugenia Isakova and the overinterpreting son of "Signs and Symbols" are negative and positive images of the same reader/text/author matrix. He then, to no great effect, looks at death-notification scenes in *Pale Fire* and *Lolita*, and in works by Kate Chopin, Sophocles, Racine, Virgil, and Kafka. Fasten your seat belts: it's a rather bumpy ride. And then there is Irving Malin's "Reading Madly," which I take to be a radical application of reader-response theory to "Signs and Symbols," an unsuccessful attempt to transfer the referential mania suffered by the nameless son to the critic himself as he reads the story. To be fair, the story strongly resists discursive analysis, and perhaps Malin was trying to get around the limitations of traditional criticism. But "Signs" is almost better served by visual interpretations such as the gorgeous Shockwave presentation designed by Peter Cho (see it at <http://acg.media.mit.edu/people/pcho/portfolio/signs/>).

Those who publish in series sponsored by learned societies or small academic presses are often at an unfair, though hardly uncommon, disadvantage: their books are not expected to sell many copies, and they are produced in the cheapest way possible, generally from files or copy supplied by the author, with no outside editor vetting the text. It therefore falls to the author, or to the editor of a collection, to give the text the kind of attention that was customary in the glory days of scholarly publishing. The editors of *Torpid Smoke* may have believed that some underpaid drudge would clean up their copy, or it may be that some underpaid drudge *did* clean up their copy and made a very bad job of it. Either way, the result is a hopelessly sloppy product.

Part of the job of the editor of a collection is to impose a uniform bibliographic style across the volume, and one of the first decisions to be made is whether there will be one large bibliography at the end or smaller ones appended to each chapter. In any case, the citation style should be consistent. Not so here; the articles go onstage in whatever bibliographic costume they wore to the audition. Some have bibliographies, some have full citations in the notes or text, and some rely on a system of in-text abbreviations that must be learned from the first note. A collection like *Torpid Smoke* should have a list of abbreviations (of Nabokov's novels, of the most frequently-cited secondary works) at the front of the volume, which saves time for the reader and eliminates repetition. There are good arguments on both sides of the separate-vs.-combined bibliography question, but there is no argument for the mongrel system employed here. The book is further marred by what seems a complete lack of copyediting and proofreading. From the first page, where the title of the Nicol/Barabtarlo collection is given incorrectly, to the last, where part of Brian Walter's biography seems to have tripped over a comma and tumbled into the void, there are far too many errors to list in a short review. The text type is undistinguished, though generously sized, and the cover (which belongs to the SSLP series) looks as though it were run up on a 1980s-era Macintosh. The paper, however, is of commendable quality; it is a shame to have to sully it with a long string of marginal corrections.

Gavriel Shapiro, ed. *Nabokov at Cornell*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003. 132 pp. ISBN 0-8014-3909-4.

Review by Paul Benedict Grant, Lethbridge, Alberta.

In September 1998, a group of international scholars gathered at Ithaca for the Cornell Nabokov Centenary Festival, the first in a worldwide series of celebra-