

AN UNPUBLISHED INTERVIEW WITH VLADIMIR AND VÉRA NABOKOV

What follows is the full text of a previously unpublished 1962 interview¹ with Vladimir and Véra Nabokov. The typescript for this interview is housed at the Berg Archive of the New York Public Library, and permission to publish the interview has been granted by both the interviewer, Phyllis Méras, and The Wylie Agency, which controls publishing rights for all of the Nabokovs' works and manuscripts.

The particulars of when the interview was conducted and why it was never published remain murky. A handwritten note at the top of the typescript says that the interview was conducted by Méras for the *New York Herald Tribune* on May 13, 1962. However, evidence suggests that it may have been conducted earlier. In the text of the interview, Méras mentions “this month’s *Pale Fire*.” *Pale Fire* was published by Putnam’s on April 25, so a May interview would not seem to align with that statement. In addition, we know that Méras did conduct an interview with Nabokov for the *Providence Sunday Journal* on the first of April, 1961.² That interview, which does not mention *Pale Fire*, was published on May 13, the same date on which this interview was supposedly conducted. My suspicion is that Méras conducted only one interview, on April 1, and intended to use the material for separate features in both the *Providence Sunday Journal* and the *New York Herald Tribune*, but the latter was not published.³ Somehow the date of publication for the *PSJ* interview was likely transposed as the interview date on the typescript for the *NYHT*

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² See Boyd and Tolstoy, *Think, Write, Speak*, pp. 310-12.

³ The *NYHT* did publish an interview with Nabokov on June 17, this time conducted by Maurice Dolbier (see *Think, Write, Speak*, pp. 316-17).

interview. As for later publication, there is a handwritten note on the top of the first page of the typescript, which reads “Not worth republishing,” which may indicate some level of discomfort with the interview on Nabokov’s part.

I was, fortunately, able to contact Phyllis Méras, who is in her nineties but very lively still and dwelling in Martha’s Vineyard, Massachusetts. As a reporter, she had a remarkable career interviewing writers, including Simone de Beauvoir, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Flannery O’Connor, and many others. At the time she interviewed the Nabokovs, she was living in Switzerland on a fellowship and just beginning her career as a journalist. Unfortunately, Méras told me that she has no memory of visiting the Nabokovs in Montreux, and she has not yet been able to turn up her notes from that period.

The interview itself is notably different than the canonical interviews collected in *Strong Opinions* and those in the more recent *Think, Write, Speak* (Boyd and Tolstoy, 2019). Nabokov had a number of well-rehearsed answers, which he repurposed for multiple interviews, and he notoriously liked to have the questions for interviews ahead of time, so that he could write out his responses. But Méras’s interview seems to be unrehearsed and includes a refreshing amount of spontaneous dialogue between Vladimir and Véra. Nabokov says a number of things in the interview that he says nowhere else. Though he would later call *Pale Fire* “a perfectly straightforward novel” (*TWS* 316), here he calls it “a rather complicated book” but also “typical” in its storytelling mode. He explicitly ties the novel to his own work on *Eugene Onegin*, calling it “a relaxation and a parody of my work.” Nabokov sought to cancel his own remark that John Shade is “a kind of second-rate Frost.” Assuming he did indeed say it, both the remark and the cancellation are of interest in terms of how Nabokov perceived Shade’s poem and how he wanted it to be perceived. Nabokov likewise makes an interesting equivalence when he says that both Shade and Kinbote are “bizarre,” since readers normally understand Shade to be mild-mannered and normal in contrast to his neighbor. In a remark previously noted by Brian Boyd in his biography, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, Nabokov locates New Wye, the setting for much of *Pale Fire*, “much more to the south” of New England or New York. Beyond the material related to *Pale Fire*, the interview gives us a number of candid exchanges between the Nabokovs, and Méras’s own contributions to the interview bring the scene to life.

The typescript contains a few handwritten cancellations, amendments, and corrections. I have used the strikethrough to note where words or sentences have been marked for cancellation. I have used brackets around added words. I have not noted non-substantive corrections to grammar and spelling.

Matthew Roth

TEXT OF INTERVIEW

Vladimir Nabokov does not believe that the novel exists. “That is something invented by our universities. Every good novel is just another novel by a good writer. What is it that matters in novels? Only intonation—the voice.”

The Russian-born author of, among others, *Lolita*, *Pnin*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and this month’s *Pale Fire* was discussing his latest work with his wife and a visitor in the Montreux, Switzerland hotel-apartment where the Nabokovs have been living for the last year.

The rain fell gloomily into the waters of Lake Geneva outside. ~~Playwright-actor Peter Ustinov’s children romped and thudded in the apartment overhead.~~ Mr. Nabokov, in a grey cashmere sweater and open-necked sport shirt, paced from window to window, past a chessboard carefully laid out on a side table; a picture of a butterfly on the wall; a bouquet of lilacs on a windowsill.

“But isn’t there a better word for intonation?” his wife suggested. “Le timbre, perhaps--style?”

“No, it’s not style. It’s the kind of thing that tells you immediately that it’s Proust or it’s Melville. It is the intonation of individual genius. Each novel by the same man will have the same

intonation. Yes, mine have, too—at least my prose has. In poetry, there's a question of technique that complicates matters.

“But I prefer to speak of poetry as an annex to prose,” Mr. Nabokov said. “This is really very, very High Church, but I see prose as something very poetical. Shakespeare—we hardly think of as a poet. What he writes makes wonderful prose. The new book, you know, begins with a poem,” and Mr. Nabokov proceeded to try to explain it.

“It's a rather complicated book,” he said, sitting down to shuffle through several sheets of yellow foolscap on which a brief outline of *Pale Fire* had been prepared.

“It is a combination of scholarly work, a poem and a mystery thriller, and the scholarly part of it is really a spoof of scholarship. Since I've done a great deal of scholarly work for many years, that part of it has been a relaxation and a parody of my work.

“Even if I don't believe in *the* novel, this is a typical one from my point of view. It's unusual in structure, but it has a story. It has dramatic tension. It presents a certain environment picturesquely.

“To put it in a nutshell, it is the commentary to a poem written by an Atlantic seaboard poet ~~who's a kind of a second-rate Frost~~. The commentator is his colleague in an American university. The poet dies immediately after finishing his poem. The story in the commentary is about how he gets killed. Both the poet and the author of the commentary are bizarre.

“It's a very amusing book, and a very thrilling book, and, really, even though at first it looks complicated, a good reader—and I write mainly for good readers—gets into it in the foreword. It's the most objective book I've ever written. I've made my protagonist a homosexual, which was quite a feat.”

“Those readers who thought when they read *Lolita* that he was ~~Humphrey~~ [Humbert], now are going to think he is a homosexual, and when *Despair*, which is another new book, comes out, they'll think he's a murderer,” Mrs. Nabokov interjected.

“What do I use the first person for?” Mr. Nabokov chewed reflectively on one end of his black-rimmed glasses. “The first person is much easier than saying ‘he thought, he intended, he said,’ I suppose. Moreover, artistically, I identify myself with the character that way. But artistically—not morally. I'm never responsible for my characters. There are many things which they do and say which I, Mr. Nabokov, would never agree to.”

“It's always much easier anyway, isn't it,” Mrs. Nabokov inserted, “to be an actor than a narrator?”

“A narrator always sounds a little high falutin',” Mr. Nabokov said.

“Don't you think the ‘I’ adds convincingness, too?” his wife inquired.

“No, no, I don't think so. A certain type of reader,” he said, “is apt to identify the ‘I’ under any circumstances with the writer of the book. That's why all sorts of odd quirks and crimes have been piled on all sorts of authors--like Dostoevsky, for example. He's been charged with all sorts of things. And then there are some readers who identify themselves with a book. That's the worst thing a reader can do. I pride myself on creating such characters that people will not want to identify with them,” Mr. Nabokov said, refitting his glasses over his yellow-green eyes.

“You see, I'm the man without a message. Ideas and symbols never enter my workshop. I'm not a didactic writer. Art—that's luxury. That's pleasure. That's a drop of honey. It's completely useless. Real art doesn't help anybody to live.”

“It deflects people from usefulness instead,” Mrs. Nabokov said. “That's why it's so unpopular in a Communist state.”

“Real art gives acute aesthetic pleasure--though perhaps only to a very small group of creative people who really appreciate it. I mean pleasure--not entertainment. That's something quite different. Aesthetic pleasure can be painful.”

“For instance, in *Pale Fire*,” Mrs. Nabokov said, “there is a daughter who is extremely pathetic. Ever since he wrote it, I've been thanking my lucky stars that I do not have an ugly daughter. But at the same time, it's wonderful. It's moving.”

Pale Fire, according to Mr. Nabokov, is not constructed around any college campus which he has actually known, although after his arrival in the United States in 1940, Mr. Nabokov taught Russian literature both at Wellesley College and at Cornell University and has lectured at Harvard.

“No, the campus is completely invented. It's much more to the south than any of the colleges with which I've been connected.”

The actual writing and research for the new book took about two years, its author explains. “But, on the whole, I've been thinking about it for quite a long time. Since when would you say, darling?” Mr. Nabokov asked his wife.

“You actually used that atmosphere in the novel you started 20 years ago in Russian and never finished,” his wife provided.

“Yes, that's right. Then it was called *Solus Rex*—the king alone which is a chess term for certain problems when the king is alone on the board. ~~The English have a simpler name for it, by the way—a king in the corner problem. But ‘solus rex’ is a very, very old term which the 18th century chess players used.~~”

Mr. Nabokov removed his glasses again, and laid them on the coffee table in front of him.

“I wanted to call this book *Solus Rex*, too, but I decided it is the kind of title that kills a book before it can be read. The present title comes from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*. ‘The moon borrows her pale fire from the sun.’ It appears in the poem in the book.”

Besides including an American university campus in its setting, *Pale Fire* also has scenes laid in an imaginary country called Zembla. It is for that reason, among others, and because the Nabokovs' son is studying singing in Milan, only a five-hour drive away, that they have been living in Switzerland recently.

“You see, I had to create a country called Zembla: I made it out of the rejects of other countries—small countries, large countries.”

“Mostly northern countries,” Mrs. Nabokov said. “Some people have thought it was a Balkan country, but it isn't.”

“Yes, mostly northern countries. I have a lot of index cards and files and I gradually collected certain details which hung together—geographical, zoological—pertaining to various northern countries. For this, I needed a little France and a little Switzerland. We were at Nice before we came to Montreux. Otherwise, I prefer living in an English-speaking country.”

Despite being St. Petersburg-born, Vladimir Nabokov has written [?] of his books to date in English. “I grew up learning English and French and Russian simultaneously. I'm a White Russian, of course. My family belonged to the very heights of intellectual Russia, but I left Russia when I was 20 to go to Trinity College, Cambridge. That was where I wanted to go in the first place. It had been settled long ago that I would go there.”

“But the revolution made the circumstances under which he went somewhat different,” Mrs. Nabokov said.

“Yes, I was as poor as a churchmouse.”

After Cambridge, Mr. Nabokov lived and wrote in Russian émigré circles in Berlin and Paris before going to America.

A second new book—or a book newly translated from its original Russian—*The Gift*, will appear in the United States in the fall, and has its background in Mr. Nabokov's life in this period.

“It's a novel set in Berlin in the 20s,” Mr. Nabokov explained, and nibbled on his glasses again. “It's the gradual evolution—mental, emotional, and intellectual—of a young Russian refugee of the set I knew in Germany and France in the 20s and 30s. But he's not myself at all. I'm just shipping it off to the publisher's now.

“When did I do the work on that? Of course, actually it was written in the middle 30s, but I've been revising the translation of it. The first chapter was translated by my son and the rest by a young Englishman named Michael Scammell. Let me see, I've been doing that and *Pale Fire* and translating Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. I would work sort of by the week by week method. I would get the proofs of *Onegin*—that's the most famous Russian novel that's ever been written, and it's never been adequately translated. It will come out in four volumes in the fall, and have a special commentary. It's taken me 10 years to do it.

“Anyway, I'd work on that for three or four days; then go back to revising a French translation that's being made of [my novel] *Pnin*. Then, in the meantime, a typist was copying out the translation of *The Gift*, and when I got tired of *Onegin*, I'd turn to the proofs of *Pale Fire*. I think I finished it in December. While I was doing the actual writing of it, I wasn't doing anything else except *Eugene Onegin*. But just a minute, I must look in my little book.” And Mr. Nabokov rose and disappeared into ~~the bedroom~~ [his study], to emerge a few minutes later with a tiny black leather, gold-tipped appointment book, in which he pointed out with care names and dates, written on its pages in a meticulous, upslanted writing.

“*Dar*, that's the Russian for gift. Those are the days I was working on it. And that—that was a tit that appeared in the garden here, and that was a blackbird,” and he pointed to another entry. “Oh yes, we like birds.”

A naturalist of considerable note, in addition to being a writer, Mr. Nabokov has prepared papers on butterflies.

“I’m going to America to attend the premiere of *Lolita* on June 13, but then I’m coming right back on the 30th of June, and going to the mountains to collect butterflies.

“We used to do that every summer in America, too, you know. As soon as my last term of school came to a close, we would set off and go anywhere butterfly hunting. We would go west and take a cabin here and there. I have such a complete obsession with butterflies that if the rain poured on one of those trips, for example, it became horribly dull. It was on one of those trips that I discovered that *War and Peace* is really a very childish piece of writing.

“We were in Babb Cabins in north Montana, and we decided to reread it. The wind was blowing so hard outside I could scarcely hear my wife read. And that was when we realized it was just an historical novel, and it dates. We stopped reading it. On the other hand, *Anna Karenina* is one of the three or four greatest novels in the world. It ranks with *Madame Bovary*, which is the greatest French novel, and *Ulysses* which, in my opinion, is the greatest English novel.

“Do I have anything in mind next? No, I’m closing up the workshop for awhile. I’m a little tired now, I must say.”

“Except that every now and then he talks about wanting to write a book on butterflies,” Mrs. Nabokov said.

“Yes, and what I would really like to do is have a special institute for breeding a certain genus of caterpillar that lives on special breeds of violets in North America, but there is one insurmountable obstacle. My wife hates caterpillars. On the other hand, I have seen her look with a certain tenderness on some of the fluffy ones.” And Mr. Nabokov smiled amusedly at his wife.

