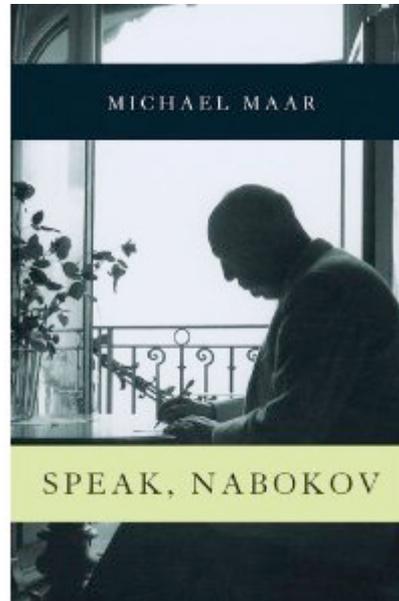


***Speak, Nabokov*, by Michael Maar / Transl. by Ross Benjamin. London, Verso, 2010:**  
ISBN 978-1-84467-437-4, viii + 148pp. Bibliography. Index.



In *Speak, Nabokov*, Michael Maar, the author of *Two Lolitas*, presents evidence of the hidden biographical details, motifs and pathologies within Nabokov's *oeuvre* which contribute to an altogether different picture of an artist, who throughout his career attempted to perform the impossible task of leaving only traces of his life within his writing. Maar proposes that "Nabokov trains his interpreters to be cabbalists", who understand "that simple questions do not have simple answers" (vii). It was Nabokov's hope "that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist" (*Strong Opinions*). Indeed there have been many such reappraisers, who have expounded upon the moralistic qualities within Nabokov's work, but it is Maar's contention that none so far have penetrated as deeply into the depths which are hidden within 'the charms of the surface' (viii).

Although these depths may be familiar to Nabokov scholars, there are nevertheless some very original insights within this book, which attempt to articulate what Maar describes as 'The Horror behind the Shimmer' (6). This short book, of fewer than 150 pages, comprises of nine thematic sections, each of which deserves further scholarly attention and debate but is unfortunately handled a little too briefly. Because of the quality of Maar's prose, it is at times

a compelling read, but will perhaps inevitably be subjected to charges of speculation and lack of evidence.

As Maar recounts, the author himself described the writing of fiction as “a rare variety of madness” (*Stories*). The central thesis of the work lies in the notion that Nabokov’s relationship to reality was characterised by a sense of terror, which placed him precariously on the brink of madness – and how various incidents in his often tragic biography informed the distinctive genius of his prose. In the section *Magician & Dwarf*, these feelings of madness, which Maar defines as an ‘alternation between narcissistic dissolution and horror, between feelings of omnipotence and those of annihilation’ (10), were also felt by the German master Thomas Mann, a writer who often was often the victim of Nabokov’s mocking contempt. Maar presents evidence of the thematic parallels and motifs between Thomas Mann’s ‘Little Herr Friedmann’, and Nabokov’s short story ‘The Potato Elf’. He sums them up as ‘the artist as egomaniac; the outsider whose sorrow never ceases; the demonic, somewhat masculine woman; a whiff of misogyny; precise knowledge and outdoing of the competition’ (17). These conclusions stand out on the page, and may appear to be insinuation and speculation, if only because Maar seems to favour a certain type of writing style, usually beloved of Thriller and Mystery writers, which, while being entertaining, seems to detract from the quality of his arguments. This is unfortunate, as there are many brilliant insights. The author, for example, attributes Nabokov’s hatred of Dostoevsky, Freud and Mann to the commonalities which they shared. ‘The most brutal wars are civil and fratricidal’, he writes, and those writers occupied the ‘few posts in the borderland that Nabokov claims for himself alone’ (18).

One of these borderlands is the realm of fairy tales, and the author suggests that Nabokov’s aesthetic disapproval of Mann is rooted in the Nobel Laureate’s appropriation of Hans Christian Andersen. Yet there is another reason, hinted at by Maar, as to why Nabokov held such feelings of hatred towards Thomas Mann. Anyone who is familiar with Mann’s diaries, the author included, must have been aware of Mann’s anguishes about his sexuality and his dubious incestuous feelings towards his son Klaus, who he claimed to be in love with. Maar suggests that Nabokov’s antipathy was primarily linked to his disapproval of Mann’s homosexuality. The author maintains that “Nabokov’s work is a forest in which it is easy to lose oneself and see nothing but the trees.” (vii) Thus minute details, such as an account in *Speak, Memory* of how the young Nabokov may have been molested by his uncle, leads to the development of his compulsive and often belligerent homophobia, and the endless cast of

negative, often pederastic and predatory, homosexuals which populate his novels. The problematic question of Nabokov's homophobia has been addressed in the past, by Lev Grossman and Paul Allen Miller amongst others. Although the theme of sexuality takes up two chapters of this work, it tends to overshadow everything else which remains. Maar believes that a great deal of the sexual themes in Nabokov's oeuvre is a result of a pathologically compulsive attitude towards homosexuality and paedophilia.

The chapter *Ultima Thule* addresses the possible influence Arthur Schopenhauer may have had on Nabokov, who was careful never to reveal a preference for the work of any one particular philosopher. Maar focuses on a remark which Nabokov made, during the course of a mountain hike with his son Dmitri, that his work was "like a film waiting to be developed. A sensation... akin to Schopenhauer's vision of events as they unfold."<sup>1</sup> Maar examines the first chapter of the unfinished *Solus Rex*, 'Ultima Thule', where the character Adam Falter, through being struck by an 'unearthly lightning', is given a glimpse of Ultimate Truth which he cannot share with others. What follows is an interesting analysis of the philosophical dimensions of Nabokov's work, and of the 'deep affinities' (55) which he shared with Schopenhauer.

Nabokov found organised religion distasteful, incompatible with his commitment to individuality and completely at odds with his hatred of the herd mentality. Nevertheless, that often quoted statement in the *Playboy* interview, his early infatuation with the mystical Symbolist movement, and the close familial relations between the Nabokovs and Dmitri Merzhkovskii, the leading ideologue of that movement, tend to cast doubt over his claims of religious abstinence. For example novels such as *Dar* and *Priglasenie na kazn'* are informed by a very definite philosophical and ideological alignment with the Russian Symbolist movement, and its Neo-Idealist notions of existence which were rooted in the philosophy of the Slavophile philosopher Vladimir Solovyov. Mysticism in Nabokov's oeuvre, is fertile ground for further study, and more emphasis on this particular subject would have been welcome.

Maar's convincing, and often brilliant, writing style leaves the reader little time to absorb the enormity of his claims, or to objectively examine the evidence which is proposed to support them. As such, it is doubtful that this work will be given much attention by the Nabokovian scholarly community who he claims are "partial, perhaps too much so, to

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Boyd, *The American Years*, London: Chatto&Windus, 1991, p. 585

Nabokov the riddler and the sphinx” (viii). There is more than a hint of self-conscious iconoclasm within Maar’s scholarship. In his 2004 much acclaimed work *Two Lolitas*, he attempted to attribute the tale of the eponymous nymph to a short story by an unknown German writer, with Nazi sympathies, named Heinz Von Lichberg. Lisa Hainsworth<sup>2</sup>, while conceding that Maar succeeded in ‘presenting an original thesis backed by convincing evidence’, nevertheless lamented the ‘gratuitous and clichéd metaphors which detracted from the overall effectiveness’ of the work. Nevertheless, there is much in this work to admire, and a great deal that is refreshing about such iconoclasm. Maar is undoubtedly a fine literary detective, and were it not for his tendency to overstate what are essentially perfectly valid arguments, and to obfuscate these arguments in language that only seeks to appeal to the general reader, this work may have been received more enthusiastically by the scholarly community.

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<sup>2</sup> See *Nabokov Online Journal*, Vol. I (2007).