
Strong Opinions, Nabokov’s carefully edited volume of interviews, letters to editors and short articles has had an enormous influence on the way his œuvre is being read. A new selection of Nabokov’s interviews inevitably creates the expectation that it will alter the image Strong Opinions has built of Nabokov.

Conversations with Vladimir Nabokov offers a considerable amount of new material: it contains 28 interviews and profiles, only six of which appear in Strong Opinions. The remaining texts have been difficult to access for most readers until now, as they have not been reprinted since their initial publication or have been collected only in volumes long out of print. Despite this, Conversations with Vladimir Nabokov does not provide Nabokovians with radically new insights. Numerous parts of the book tread the same ground as Strong Opinions simply because, as Dieter E. Zimmer has pointed out in the past, many interviewers contacted Nabokov “with more or less the same premeditated questions in mind,” and hoped for getting “the same ‘stark’ statements the competition had, but worded differently.”2 It is inevitable, then, that two out of the four

---

1 The present review was written during a research stay at Fordham University (New York, NY), funded by the Rosztoczy Foundation. I am immensely grateful to the Foundation in general and to Dr Thomas Kerenyi, Diane Rosztoczy and the late Ferenc Rosztoczy, Ph.D., in particular. I am also thankful to Erica Buchman for all her help and for our invigorating talks.

conversations that Robert Golla, the present collection’s editor, lists in his introduction as the most insightful ones, are already well-known from *Strong Opinions* (the *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* and *Playboy* interviews).

The introduction does not mention the overlap with *Strong Opinions* but addresses the volume’s inherent repetitiousness: “the reader will at times encounter repetitious questions and answers, but the evolution of Nabokov’s answers, such as his estimation of his best works or *dénouement* preference for writing in English over his native Russian, will hopefully prove of value in their unexpurgated form to scholars and general readers alike” (xiii). Tracking the subtle changes in Nabokov’s responses is indeed one of the greatest joys the volume offers. But if the collection admittedly tries to reach both scholars and general readership, it is unfortunate that no commentary draws attention to the factual errors present in some of the interviews. Longtime readers of Nabokov will of course notice inaccuracies, but newcomers to his writing may not know that, for instance, *The Gift* is not “one of Nabokov’s early Russian novels” (116) but his last Russian novel, which happened to be one of the first to appear in English translation. The lack of editorial interjection is intentional, as Golla explains: “As is customary with books in the *Literary Conversations* Series, these interviews are published without editorial commentary, allowing readers to appraise Nabokov free from the prism of critical interpretation or conjecture” (xiii). Even if inserting footnotes in the interviews themselves was not an option, a few explanatory remarks could have been made at least in the introduction (which is somewhat shorter than most introductions in the series) to give context to the controversial articles, namely, those by Helen Lawrenson, Penelope Gilliatt, Alan Levy, and the first of Herbert Gold’s two pieces (“The Artist in Pursuit of Butterflies”). Nabokov strongly criticized all of these articles for their inaccuracies.³

Levy’s article, for instance, infuriated Nabokov so much that he mentioned it in a later interview as “a long piece with embarrassed misquotations, wrong intonations, and false exchanges in the course of which I am made to dismiss the scholarship of a dear friend [Alfred Appel, Jr.] as ‘pedantry’ and to poke ambiguous fun at a manly writer’s [Solzhenitsyn’s] tragic fate.”⁴ When Levy published a slightly expanded version of his article in a book of his, he reacted to Nabokov’s objections. He wrote: “I must stand by both the quotation about Alfred Appel and the nonquotation about Solzhenitsyn. [...] I had a witness.”⁵ Levy explains that although Nabokov warned him that his remark on Solzhenitsyn “had been off the record,” Levy “felt no obligation” to leave it out from

---

3 See Zimmer’s above-cited bibliography.
the article because Nabokov had not given the warning before making the remark, only “a minute or two later.” As a compromise, Levy decided to paraphrase Nabokov’s utterance as follows: “And who will deny that, from the Arbors of Ardis, there issued wild cackles of Laughter at the manly prose of this tragic, heroic political figure who would not risk going to Sweden to accept his Nobel Prize for fear Russia might force him into emigration?” (192). Whether this is a fair paraphrase or a misleading one that is ambiguous about Nabokov’s source of amusement (Solzhenitsyn’s fate or prose) is up for debate. The editor certainly has to refrain from settling this debate. But not introducing the reader to Nabokov’s objections and Levy’s reactions to them is not as impartial as it might seem. Especially if Golla cites in his introduction one of the quotations that Nabokov found offensive: “He [Alfred Appel] was described by Nabokov as ‘my pedant. A pedant straight out of Pale Fire. Every writer should have such a pedant’” (xii).

Contextualizing the interviews Nabokov deemed inaccurate could have also refined our image of Nabokov as the overbearing interviewee. While Nabokov is famous for wanting complete control over his interviews, even he did not manage to tailor every article to his liking. Occasionally, he was left with complaining in letters to editors. Nowhere is this clearer than in the letter he wrote to Esquire, the journal which published Lawrenson’s article: “[n]one of these blunders were inevitable; all you had to do was send me your article to check the factual points before publishing it.”

The volume might have missed the opportunity to point out this unfamiliar side of Nabokov but in other respects it does refine our image of him. Even if it does not introduce new aspects of Nabokov, it still provides additional material for topics already popular in Nabokov criticism. The relationship between ethics and art is one of such topics. In a 1964 interview, Nabokov outlines the moral of his most famous novel with an explicitness uncharacteristic of him: “‘I don’t think Lolita is a religious book,’ he says, ‘but I do think it is a moral one. And I do think that Humbert Humbert in his last stage is a moral man because he realizes that he loves Lolita like any woman should be loved. But it is too late; he has destroyed her childhood. There is certainly this kind of morality in it’” (92). This outline helps us better understand Nabokov’s statement in his afterword to Lolita that

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{The letter was published in Vogue 55, no. 6 (June 1961): 10. There, Nabokov lists the following “blunders”: Véra Nabokov never worked as a milliner and her father was not “the former owner of the largest and most important publishing house in Russia”; Nabokov would not have been fired from Cornell even if Lolita had not become a success. Finally, Lawrenson mocks Nabokov’s claim that under the Czar “a freedom-loving Russian had more freedom than under Lenin”—Lawrenson ironically remarks that Nabokov did not specify “whether he meant freedom-loving aristocrats or freedom-loving serfs.” Nabokov points out that Lawrenson’s remark ignores the fact that “it was Lenin who restored serfdom in Russia.”}\]
the novel “has no moral in tow.” If the 1964 interview identifies a morality in *Lolita*, then the famous quotation from the afterword should not be taken to mean that the novel has no moral at all (as it has sometimes been suggested); Nabokov merely wrote that the novel had no moral *in tow*. When he denies that his works have a moral or a message, he always refers to didactic messages or ideas that are imposed upon the book (as opposed to moralities intrinsic to the narrative): “The book has no message. I’m no messenger boy. A book has to stand on its own two feet or fly on its own two wings, or four” (7).

Closely related to the question of potential messages is Nabokov’s vision of the ideal reader. In 1958, he describes what he expects of his audience: “*Lolita* is to be enjoyed as a detached, intellectual exercise. No tears to be shed. You’re supposed to enjoy it with your spinal emotions, with a little shiver when you read it” (9). This approach hardly sounds unfamiliar to Nabokovians. What makes it interesting is that Nabokov contradicts his “no tears to be shed” regulation a year later: the good reader, he says then, “takes pleasure in his aloofness and yet enjoys the shivers along the spine and the tears...” (46; ellipsis in the original). While both quotations stress the importance of a dispassionate reading strategy, the exact limitations of the audience’s emotional investment are unclear. Whether this ambiguity is due to a slip of the pen or indicative of uncertainty on Nabokov’s part would merit further discussion.

At certain points, the volume presents some of Nabokov’s views on ethics-related topics that were not aired in *Strong Opinions*. For instance, an argument about the Charles Manson case reveals that Véra and Vladimir Nabokov disagree on the death penalty. While the writer pronounces that he “oppose[s] capital punishment” and thus sees life imprisonment as the most fitting sentence for Manson and his followers, his wife believes that “[t]hey’re too dangerous” and should be executed (190). Another curiosity concerns Nabokov’s views on censorship. It is well-known that he was against the expurgation of works of art. Less well-known is that he thought censorship was in order when the licentious product was not art: “I think there should be some kind of censorship against downright pornography and that kind of thing, there’s no doubt about that” (37).

Another recurrent topic in the volume, one that Golla points out in the foreword, is Nabokov’s switch to English. No doubt, the interviews in *Strong Opinions* also discuss this switch in detail, but here the reader can witness the actual process of the writer gaining confidence. The interviewer in the very first conversation of the volume already comments on this aspect of Nabokov’s career: “*Lolita* was written in English, but Nabokov insists that he could have done better in Russian” (5). In the next conversation, Nabokov calls English “the richest language in the

---

world” because “[i]t is wonderful for expressing abstractions and for coining the names of things,” but immediately adds: “of course, my English is just an echo of my Russian” (9). A year later he notes: “My English is getting better” (31). He claims to be in the “last stage” of his “metamorphosis” as a writer: “After a period of panic and groping, I managed to settle down rather comfortably” (35). A few years later he suggests that writing in English no longer poses a problem to him: “‘It doesn’t matter to me in what language I write,’ he said. ‘Language is just another instrument. Except that, of course, English is the language with the richest literature’” (60). Another two years later he bluntly says: “At this point I write English better than the other two [Russian and French], and prefer it” (92-93). Finally, Alfred Appel records in a retrospective article the milestones of the evolution of Nabokov’s English. To make absolutely sure that the language of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, his first novel written in English, was not stiff, Nabokov “begged” Agnes Perkins (the head of the English Department of Wellesley College) to read the galley proofs of the book, even though “Lucie Leon had [already] gone over the manuscript” earlier “in Paris” (165). Later, “[i]n Speak, Memory, his fifth book in English, Nabokov became the master of a variegated and virtuoso prose; henceforth he would seek no further advice on English” (171).

Yet another prominent question in Nabokov criticism for which the volume provides some additional material is humor. The conversation with Phyllis Meras begins with a page-long discussion of humor, where Nabokov asserts that “[a]ll writers that are worth anything are humorists” (59). He seems to associate humor specifically with prose in his jab at Eugene O’Neill: “The best tragedian is O’Neill. He is probably the worst writer” (59). Nabokov also rejects the suggestion that “the satirical Lolita” is “a humorous book” by disassociating it from prose: “‘It’s not humor,’ he replied. ‘It’s not a story. It’s a poem’” (59). He then reflects on the elusiveness of the concept of humor, and concludes: “Perhaps humor is simply seeing things in a singular, unique, extraordinary way” (59). “‘Yes, the unusual is funny in itself,’ Nabokov agreed [with his wife]. ‘A man slips and falls down. It is the contrary of gravity in both senses—that’s a great pun, by the way’” (60).

The previously uncollected interviews contain exciting passages like the above-cited ones (and, admittedly, a lot of answers already familiar from Strong Opinions). But even the six interviews that had been included in Strong Opinions offer a bit of novelty because they are reprinted not from Nabokov’s collection but from their original source of publication. In the case of Robert Hughes’ interview, this means an almost completely different text. As Zimmer explains in his above-cited bibliography, in Strong Opinions Nabokov only used the answers he had prepared on index cards in advance; but the crew also filmed him answering additional questions offhand,
and the version in the present volume is a transcription of this spontaneous part. Nabokov wrote the following about this material: “I am greatly distressed and disgusted by my unprepared answers—by the appalling style, slipshod vocabulary, offensive, embarrassing statements and muddled facts. These answers are dull, flat, repetitive, vulgarly phrased and in every way shockingly different from the style of my written prose, and thus from the ‘card’ part of the interview.” The reader now has the opportunity to see the unprepared answers and decide for herself whether they are as distressing as Nabokov thought.

In the case of the other interviews, the difference between their initial appearance and the versions published in Strong Opinions are not nearly this drastic. The changes in these texts are small, but they might still be of interest. For instance, after comparing the two variants of Peter Duval Smith’s interview (originally published in The Listener), it seems to me that some of Nabokov’s alterations were aimed at further dissociating himself from Humbert Humbert. In The Listener version (reprinted in Golla’s collection), Nabokov answers the question “Did Lolita herself have an original?” the following way: “No, Lolita didn’t have any original. She is perhaps a great-grand-niece, born in my own mind. She never existed” (67). In Strong Opinions, Nabokov omits the reference to the metaphorical great-grand-niece and shortens the sentence to “She was born in my own mind,” probably to prevent skeptical, overeager readers from taking that metaphor too literally and assuming the existence of such a real-life girl serving as the book’s model. Nabokov also distances himself from the topic of pedophilia by an even smaller alteration. In the Listener, he explains that Lolita “treated of the theme which was so distant, so remote, from my own emotional life that it gave me a special pleasure to use my combinational talent to make it real” (66). In Strong Opinions, he writes that the book “treated of a theme” instead of “the theme,” presumably because the indefinite article suggests that there were a number of other topics equally distant from Nabokov’s emotional life that he could have picked. This way, his choosing pedophilia as subject matter seems even more incidental. Finally, there is yet another alteration that concerns Nabokov’s personal relationship to the subject matter of Lolita. He originally wrote that he had read case histories of adults who “seduced little girls” (67); in Strong Opinions, he speaks of adults who “pursued little girls.” While “seduction” may imply the victim’s consent, “pursuit” does not necessarily suggest that the pursuer’s advances were welcomed and the word better captures the inappropriateness of such actions. Therefore, Nabokov manages to subtly convey his disapproval

10 Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 16.
11 Ibid., 15.
12 Ibid., 16.
without making a didactic statement.

Of course, other changes simply show Nabokov perfecting his metaphors and the rhythm of his prose. For instance, he originally declared: “No, I think in images, and now and then a Russian phrase or an English phrase will crop up with the foam of the brainwave, but that’s about all” (65). In Strong Opinions, he discards the phrase “crop up” and writes instead that phrases “will form with the foam of the brainwave,”¹³ probably because the word “form” expands the wave metaphor. Tracing such changes provides one with a glimpse into Nabokov’s workshop.

Other readers might select different passages from Conversations with Vladimir Nabokov. This is only natural, since part of the appeal of reading interviews stems from their heterogeneity and loose structure. Still, no matter which parts of the book stay with readers, they will probably all agree that the collection is a welcome addition to the Nabokov bibliography but not quite as indispensable as Strong Opinions.

Péter Tamás,

Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest

¹³ Ibid., 14.