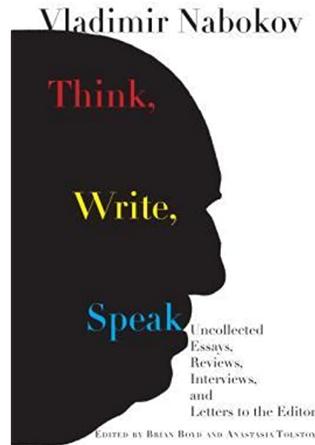


Think, Write, Speak: Uncollected Essays, Reviews, and Letters to the Editor. Edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy. New York: Knopf Publishing Group, 2019. ISBN-10: 1101874910. Hardcover, 576 pp.



In an interview taken in 1963, Nabokov mentioned that his “political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock.”¹ The volume *Think, Write, Speak*, edited by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy, presents a distinct opportunity to not only review the subtle undulations of Nabokov’s seemingly “changeless” worldview, but also foregrounds elements which had formed the background of his career. In Boyd’s words, these writings form “the rolling shadow of the train of his fiction,” allowing us to survey his metamorphosis as an author by showcasing an ample number and variety of uncollected (and some unpublished) writings stretching over sixty years, capturing Nabokov at major as well as interstitial periods of his life. The volume’s scope thus exceeds that of recent non-fiction collections like *Conversations with Nabokov* (ed. Robert Golla) and *Insomniac Dreams* (ed. Gennady Barabtarlo). As Boyd mentions in the introduction, far from being relegated to marginalia, these writings form the “bulk and not the bottom of the barrel” containing Nabokov’s non-fiction.

The decision to order the writings chronologically lends a certain free-wheeling unpredictability absent in themed collections like *Lectures on Literature*. Unlike *Speak, Memory*, which was written as an aesthetic effort to narrate life in a way resembling fiction, the pleasure in this volume is precisely the absence of design – a reader might encounter a lecture, followed by

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage International Books, 1990), 44.

an interview, and then a magazine profile, and so on. Moreover, these uncollected writings gain new connotations and contexts when viewed in proximity to one another against the background of the time in which they were written. Indeed, there is a certain irony in the fact that Nabokov, himself always against associating authors with eras, is pinned to certain periods by some of the pieces. This allows the reader to trace a theme to its earliest occurrence, or to mark the distance between any two pieces written at distinct points of his life, highlighting consistencies and contradictions. The effect altogether is of Nabokov's personality being refracted through these writings into the diverse parts that constitute it.

Boyd justifiably mentions his surprise that such a project had not been undertaken yet. The sheer variety and volume of unpublished as well as untranslated writings, especially from the earlier part of his life in Berlin, easily warrants the collection. His essays and talks, delivered before groups like the Aykhenvald-Tatarinov circle or published in émigré publications like *Slovo*, illuminate much of his émigré life, his aesthetic sensibilities, and his political impressions. Furthermore, if not for this collection, these pieces would have been extremely hard to access and translate for scholars interested in this phase of his life, who could know them hitherto mostly through book-length studies that stemmed from such writings, such as Thomas Karshan's *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (which bases itself on an essay titled "Play").

By far the most invaluable pieces offered by this volume are from Nabokov's youth, written as a Cambridge student and as a Russian emigre in Berlin. Seeing a date alongside these jottings, one is also curiously compelled to reflect upon this patch of time crowded with events personal and political – World War I, the aftermath of the October Revolution, his father's death. And yet, these events are sharply contrasted, almost to the point of rebellion, by Nabokov's focus on minutiae of daily life passing by, unrecorded and unvalued by capital-H History but rescued by his eye. One can glimpse his style and imagery, impressionistic but promising, which would later become his signature. As a passionate contributor to publications such as *Rul'*, we see him keenly observing details of his newfound emigre life. Contemplating the town of Cambridge and its alien nature, we find streetside impressions elevated above socio-political tumults in Nabokov's quintessential synesthetic perception, translated adeptly by Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy. The chiming of church bells comes in "round, silvery sounds," a professor's "flash of wit splashes like

a fish” in an otherwise sullen class, and vulgarly decorated shop-windows of Cambridge seem as “blasphemous as colored-pencilled doodles sketched in the margins of a sacred book” (42).

In these earlier pieces, Nabokov often imagines a 21st century reader, almost anticipating this volume and us, its readers. As if to confirm the trivial as the essential, he telescopes forward in time to look back on our behalf, defamiliarizing his daily life by transforming everything mundane into something quaint. His insistence on the utter futility of summing up eras or periods becomes a refrain. In an essay titled “On Generalities,” he mocks the taxonomizing tendency of historians, trying to label the era he occupied, unaware of the “Homeric laughter that would seize us were we to glance through future textbooks” (102). In another long essay, “Writers and the Era,” he again visualizes a future historian searching for the essence of the era by smoothening the random nature of the past: “I try to imagine all this as a past resuscitated... to find the passer-by dressed in a bygone style,” but these are “experiments in vain”, for the historian “will not have a direct sensation of reality” (157). The historian is always a leveler of differences, and Nabokov fashions himself against this. “There’s nothing of the systematizer in me,” he claims, not only preferring the ‘sunny trifles’² of his time over generalities, but also believing the latter to be impossible and essentially false. “Man will never be the master of time,” he writes, but it is worthwhile to redeem the details, to “examine the nuance that escapes us, the ray that is out of place, that shade whose ungraspable velvet isn’t made for our touch.”

This skepticism of generalities also extends into a rejection of political projects or state ideals that promise a certain telos. As Nabokov reviews the work of Soviet writers coerced by the Soviet State, his distaste for anything that fixes a future becomes evident. “This kind of point of view ruins an artist, and it is here that I detect the primary reason for the unartfulness of Russian literature” (98), he says in a survey of Soviet Literature’s initial years, exposing the openly didactic and formulaic fiction produced under censorship. The characters and situations are generalized as to be prototypes, and because “available types” are the only thing that matter in Soviet fiction, “we don’t remember their names, they have no names.” Such rare bursts of polemic, while registering of Soviet censorship of writers, also sharply discern how the stagnant Soviet state forbids uncertainty or conflict – the life-blood of literature, without which not only can there be no good

² Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers”, in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 1.

fiction, but no need for fiction. “In the Perfect State, where all are happy, where boy-gets-girl and vice versa, because there can be no social conflict, neither Werther, nor Hedda Gabler, nor Madame Bovary may appear in the flesh” (223).

As vehement as Nabokov is against circles or fraternities, an inescapable sense of community does waft through some pieces, especially in the obituaries and book reviews which evoke noted members of the Russian emigre community like Aykhenvald, Nina Berberova, and A. M. Chorny. Once a student ill at ease with the sensation of exile, he realizes the value of an intangible, dream-like space for emigre writers. In the essay “Anniversary,” for example, while expressing a spirit of brotherhood with all those displaced and scattered after the revolution, he sardonically thanks the revolution for the paradoxical freedom of exile, for “giving us the chance to partake of this freedom...to feel our homeland acutely in exile.” Elsewhere, Nabokov seems to imply that the very loss of homeland itself is the reason and the condition under which this community’s spirit of freedom exists. A sophomore Nabokov, estranged and aslant to his surroundings, already had a sense of this. “One can get used to anything, and learn to notice beauty in what’s strange” (44), he’d said of Cambridge. In a later essay written just before leaving Europe, he writes how the phrase “emigre writer” might even be tautological, since “any true author emigrates into his art and exists within it,” and that Russia was always “nostalgic, even if he never left it” (198).

As Nabokov leaves war-torn Europe for America, managing a foothold in the American intelligentsia, his writings lose an epistolary flavor and gain a semi-scholarly bent. Mostly, we see Nabokov reviewing books of various genres – ethnographical, fictional, and philosophical – while attempting to earn a livelihood as well as repute in the world of letters. From time to time, through reviewing books on Shakespeare, Russian humor, and some translated works, his knowledge and familiarity of the canon shines through. For the reader, it is a minor curiosity to observe him praise or pan the obscure writers who become, as it were, accidental asteroids momentarily lit up by the approaching light of his rising star.

After a gap of four years from 1952, such forays are replaced by a rapid stream of interviews and features for magazines, propelled by the controversy and eventual success of *Lolita*. From time to time, we come across amusing curios that one could not have guessed (that Nabokov enjoyed Fellini’s *8 ½* and *La Strada*, or that he loathed Philip Roth’s *Portnoy’s Complaint*, etc.).

Especially after 1958, as the interviews uncover Nabokov's hobby-horses and other professions (index cards, chess problems, lepidoptery etc.), there appears to be a cooling off of Nabokov's personality, a congealing of opinions and a guardedness that works presumably as a barrier against the rising public interest in him. Most of the questions or themes are predictably *Lolita*-centric, with many questions repeated about its origin and the "scandal." It is a phase from which readers might have glimpsed one or two popular interviews, but the collection really gives one an idea as to how emphatic was the surge of interest.

From these interviews, one can glean that Nabokov is slowly but surely crafting a public persona, quite certain of the image he wants to commit to history. True to his foreword in *Strong Opinions*, he takes "every precaution to ensure a dignified beat of the mandarin's fan" (1). This rigor contrasts the pre-*Lolita* interviews, where he seems less braced for fame. Nevertheless, Nabokov continues his resistance to generalizations and his chagrin at political movements, but against this consistent backdrop, two particular themes undergo beguiling variations – his switch from Russian to English, and the morality of fiction (especially in *Lolita*). The first of these themes have been explored in books such as Michael Wood's *The Magician's Doubts*, whereas the latter was recently the subject of *Nabokov and the Question of Morality*.

Throughout the volume, *Lolita* is sometimes described as a book to be "enjoyed as a detached, intellectual exercise" (322), while at other times, as "an indictment of all the things it expresses" (332). Later, he says that he is "no moralist" and hates literature "that wants to announce a message," only to relapse in the very next interview, denying that the book is "amoral," with the moral being "don't harm children" (382). Only fifteen years later do we reach something resembling a resolution, when Nabokov suggests that even though his books don't have moralistic intent, they might be moral in and of themselves. "If their art is good, so are their morals" (549).

The switch of language seems more of an aporia, with interviewers tantalizingly hovering around it while never quite asking point blank. Boyd approaches this in the introduction, by citing Nabokov's words that contradict (among others) Alexander Dolinin's claim that Nabokov often downplayed his Russian in favor of a cosmopolitan attitude. However, there are as many occasions where Nabokov expresses a kind of impasse with his Russian. "I write English better, and prefer it", he says in 1964, confessing six years later that his Russian had suffered "a hardening of [the] vocabulary" (500). Declaring himself an "American writer," he says that to write in Russian again

“would be like playing ordinary hockey after ice hockey” (390). He even goes so far as to cancel his famous praise of his Russian as ‘untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile’³ as naive, for it “has lost the suppleness I was so proud of” (566). To some degree, this recalls Michael Wood’s conjecture that he switched languages not only to garner more readers, but to write his own brand of English by “shaking off the spectre of his Russian.”⁴

Such variations suggest there are enough sides of Nabokov in this volume to refute or extend arguments dear to many scholars. As Smurov, the protagonist of *The Eye* thinks, and as Nabokov himself writes in the obituary for Yuly Aykhenvald, a person lives on for as long as some memory of him lives in others’ minds; the more the memories the more his reflections. Nabokov’s name, of course, is far from being threatened by oblivion, but no reader can have complaints with the ample unseen reflections of him, as well as of those he remembers, offered by this volume.

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³ Vladimir Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” in *Lolita* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 316-317.

⁴ Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), 5.