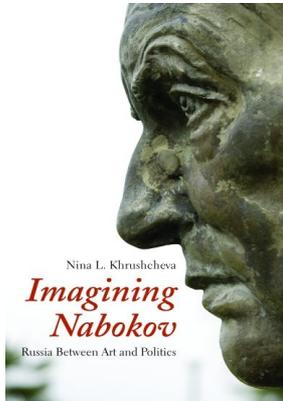


***Imagining Nabokov: Russia between Art and Politics*, by Nina Khrushcheva. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; ISBN 978-0-300-10886-6, xvii + 233 pp.**



Literary visitors to Russia are always impressed by the number of monuments to great writers. There are surprisingly few statues of Shakespeare in England, but in Russia it can seem that Pushkin's curly locks adorn every street corner. Russian literary culture is distinctly monumentalising. Nabokov himself traces the political background to this in his *Lectures on Russian Literature*, where he recalls how the Tsars from Nicholas I on sought to co-opt literature to their own ends, casting Pushkin and other writers in ideologically convenient images. Schools were instructed to teach carefully chosen selections of literature, and the appropriate sentimental response was endorsed and rewarded: schoolgirls were expected to cry with Tatiana over her treatment by Onegin. The result was the culture Nabokov describes, in which ordinary Russians felt they knew and owned Pushkin because they half-remembered tags from school and calendars and yearbooks, and because they had seen Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*. Nabokov, of course, vehemently opposed the philistinism of all this, and went to great lengths, in his edition of *Eugene Onegin*, to show that Pushkin's famous 1836 poem "I have raised myself a monument" is in fact a parody of a culture's deadening impulse to turn a poet into a statue.

Nina Khrushcheva's new book, ostensibly about Nabokov, is a product and curious continuation of this culture. She appears on the back dust-jacket, staring past the bronzed face of the Nabokov statue which now sits outside the Montreux Palace Hotel. Khrushchev's great-granddaughter, she describes how she grew up at the heart of the

Soviet establishment, how she studied Russian literature and “wept over the poetry of Anna Akhmatova” (2), in the accepted Russian manner. She heard people reciting how “we live in Gogol ... Dostoevsky ... Bulgakov”.

After *perestroika* she moved to Princeton in 1991 to do graduate work on comparative literature. More recently she has taught International Affairs, but in 2001 she went back to Moscow, “full of nearly Messianic intentions” to give a course on Nabokov, seeing herself as “in many ways walking in Nabokov’s footsteps” (22-3). Russians, she thinks, need to follow Nabokov’s example. “He was a model of international success, for he kept his soul without having to remain backward in order to do so.” (23) To her delight, her students seem already to have gotten the message, and “the post-postcommunist new-century kids were able to put literature to ‘practical’ use.” (24) “Nabokov” – they told her (or did she tell them?) – “is a literary manual for our everyday life on the road from the impractical Russian intellectual to the efficient, pragmatic, Western individual.” (25)

Imagining Nabokov is that manual. For Khrushcheva, Nabokov offers four key lessons to modern Russia. First, his characters are more proactive, less supine and self-pitying than the passive moaners of most Russian literature. On this score she is a bit vague, but she seems to have in mind Gogol’s and Dostoevsky’s saintly masochists. As an antidote, she invokes Max Weber’s often-quoted *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-5), her (only) illustration of the forward-looking Western individualism she believes Nabokov’s novels exemplify. Second, according to Khrushcheva, Nabokov “attempts to break from the vague, amorphous, and inflated digressions and metaphors of ‘circular’ Russian literature, known for its dead ends and no-ends.” (15) Third, Nabokov, as opposed to, say, Pushkin, valued craft above luck in artistic composition. He was a Salieri, not a Mozart. This, too, is a useful model for contemporary Russian citizens, who should work harder. Fourth, he shows us how to be like Pnin, happy with the ordinary, not the heroic, course of life (171).

The fourth point touches on an important issue. On the difficult relations of ordinariness and happiness, Khrushcheva has identified one of Nabokov’s key themes, and reworked, in a much simplified form, some of Michael Wood’s intricate reflections on this matter in his 1994 book *The Magician’s Doubts*. Here one of the few fresh

sentences in her book occurs, when she says that “in the Western world happiness isn’t faith but *patience*, as *Pnin*’s author reminds us.” (169) Bizarrely, however, she seems to think that *Ada* is a tale of “‘normal’ happiness”, and also – as if the two could easily be equated – of “‘fairytale’ happiness, and shows the “contentment of its heroes” – as if Van and Ada did not oscillate between demonic elations and equally demonic misery. She seems not to recognise that Nabokov’s phrase “the habit of freedom” (which she quotes on page 53), is a paradox which Nabokov spent his American novels unpuzzling. She does not realise that *Pnin* longs for ordinary happiness because he cannot achieve it, hardly a model her Russian students could want to follow. If she were looking for the Nabokovian exemplar of ordinary domestic happiness, she might have done slightly better to pick on John Shade in *Pale Fire*, but then he is not Russian, and he is a drunkard whose daughter has committed suicide. The habit of happiness, like the habit of freedom, is for Nabokov a precarious contradiction, which is why Nabokov indicates secret affinities between Shade’s supposed happiness and Kinbote’s apparent misery.

The third point about craft and chance in composition is a subtle one, but Khrushcheva does little to qualify or develop it, and as it stands her view is clearly wrong - as will be obvious from a glance at *The Gift*, in which Fyodor offers hymns to felicity and coincidence, in life and art, to balance his tributes to craft and necessity. Nabokov valued luck as well as craft, experienced the often painful tension of the two in the act of composition, and beautifully explored that tension throughout his work, but especially in *Pale Fire*, whose subject is the impossibility of shearing coincidence neatly off from necessity.

The first and second points are the most nakedly ideological, and can be dealt with together. The idea that there are no Russian sources for Nabokov’s characters, which Khrushcheva advances on page 2, is one that she herself disavows on page 58. In a crucial passage, her imaginary Nabokov says that:

My characters have come out of Russian literature, out of *Anna Karenina*, *The Idiot*, *The Diary of a Madman* ... We all found ourselves in another age, at another longitude and latitude, tossed onto other shores on the next postrevolutionary coil of the spiral. But the language was our handicap. It was

getting in the way of a new transforming hero, preventing this hero from understanding the virtues of a straight and simple line, word, rule, sentence. It metastasized with endless lyrical digressions, fenced and circled itself with parentheses and commas, sprouted semicolons and dashes all over the never-ending volumes, covering all our eleven time zones. Snowdrifts of suffering and excitement prevented the determined and driven individual who was free from all emotional reflections from moving on. The useless and impractical knowledge of a Russian intellectual required retooling into better practical skills in **efficient, alabastrine, humane America**. (58-59)

The bold lettering at the end of this paragraph signals a direct quotation from *Pnin*, torn from the context which lends it its complex ironies, and slipped evasively into Khrushcheva's own thoughts. This practice reminded me of the passage in *Bend Sinister* in which the scholar, Professor Hamm, under the patronage of Paduk's totalitarian regime, produces a new Fascist-tinged reading of *Hamlet* whose real hero is not Prince Hamlet, the dream-paralysed mumbler, but Fortinbras, the man of action, "this fine Nordic youth" who enters at the end of the play to purify the stagnant waters of corrupt Denmark. The proposition that straight simple lines and words are better than digressions and commas is pure Paduk; it is the exact opposite of Nabokov's own passionately and frequently expressed preference for complexity over the coercive simplicity of "commonsense and its logic". And the suggestion that Nabokov's novels are not digressive makes one afraid that Khrushcheva may hardly have read them at all. *The Gift* was famous in émigré circles for its ingenious ring-composition, its sluggish, many-claused sentences, and the endless digressions of Fyodor's consciousness. *Pale Fire* is built as a series of rings, with the last line of Shade's poem replicating the first; Kinbote's footnotes are the quintessence of Sternean digression, and the book as a whole, once apprehended in the interplay between its parts, is a vast, four-dimensional digression, conjured up in the act of reading. So, too, Hermann in *Despair*, and Humbert in *Lolita*, are pulsating squiggles of interlaced and tangled up digressions, like their model – Dostoevsky's underground man. Nabokov is one of the most digressive writers in world literature.

Khrushcheva's method consists of personal meditations, circling around an imagined conversation with Nabokov's ghost, who conveniently expresses all of Khrushcheva's opinions. This approach is reminiscent of Fyodor's imagined conversations with Koncheyev in *The Gift*, and, curious and unconventional though it is, there is no reason why it could not have made for a good book. Light conversation is indeed a more Nabokovian, and Pushkinian, metaphor for literary experience than the statue, and the intimacy of the mode could be a perfect medium for brilliant reflections. Nonetheless, it seems wrong that Khrushcheva not only allows her voice to merge into Nabokov's – that weak whimsy is at least obvious – but also, very often, misleads us as to whom she is quoting (14; 44-5). She also brusquely mixes together remarks made by various of Nabokov's characters (including Van Veen, whom Nabokov said he despised (57)), in entirely different contexts, with comments from his own interviews.

Worse, though, turns to worst, when Khrushcheva inflicts upon Nabokov's ghost her own borrowed clichés – ““We've all come out of Gogol's 'Overcoat'”, he said with a smile.” (58) The book is a catalogue of *poshlost*: “My Russian heart warmed” (22) “The long years I had spent in Princeton and New York had turned a somewhat highbrow, otherworldly Russian intellectual into a practical Westerner.” (23) “Blood-chilling oxymoron” (29). “I had stolen her dream” (35). “He was lost in thought again.” (69) When she first read *Lolita*, “It shook me to the depths of my soul.” (75) “Human history isn't just the history of pain, it's a history of the courage to prevail.” (93) “For a Russian poetic soul, the rational United States seems to respect poetry but isn't overwhelmingly interested in it.” (133) And – my favourite – “Kindness is immortal, especially when it's a kindness that breaks through hurt and injustice.” (165) She shows, in fact, a complete disregard for what Nabokov has actually written, as when she suggests that Pnin should be an example for post-communist Russians in that he “dares to live in the present, to dream and to lose, to fall and to rise”. And yet on the very same page she quotes a passage of *Pnin* whose import is the exact opposite of this: “He was beloved not for any essential ability but for those unforgettable digressions of his, when he would remove his glasses to beam at the past while massaging the lenses of the present.” (167)

It is this complete disregard for the meaning of the authors whom she blithely quotes that partially saves the book from being as destructive as it might be. She is trying

to use Nabokov's name and cultural authority as cultural ammunition in defence of Yeltsin-era free-market individualism, but her book unwittingly provides any careful reader, even one who knows nothing of Nabokov, with plenty of rebukes to this ideological coercion of literature. As she quotes Mandelstam as saying, "the true writer [is] the mortal enemy of literature", which "always and everywhere carries out one assignment: it helps superiors keep their soldiers obedient and it helps judges execute reprisals against doomed men." (142) And Nabokov is quoted from *Nikolai Gogol*. "*Poshlust*, it should be repeated, is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is *not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion." (163)

I also note that there are several errors in the English (for instance, "effects" for "affects" (152); and, of "Pushkin's tempestuous fate" (sic), "Itself it guides the poet" (116-7)), and that there is no index.

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