

From: jeevacation@gmail.com
Sent: Thur 5/30/2013 12:45:19 PM
Subject: This exchange with Alvin Toffler appeared in

This exchange with Alvin Toffler appeared in *Playboy* for January, 1964. Great trouble was taken on both sides to achieve the illusion of a spontaneous conversation. Actually, my contribution as printed conforms meticulously to the answers, every word of which I had written in longhand before having them typed for submission to Toffler when he came to Montreux in mid-March, 1963. The present text takes into account the order of my interviewer's questions as well as the fact that a couple of consecutive pages of my typescript were apparently lost in transit. *Egreto perambis doribus!*

With the American publication of Lolita in 1958, your fame and fortune mushroomed almost overnight from high repute among the literary cognoscenti-- which you had enjoyed for more than 30 years-- to both acclaim and abuse as the world-renowned author of a sensational bestseller. In the aftermath of this cause celebre, do you ever regret having written Lolita?

On the contrary, I shudder retrospectively when I recall that there was a moment, in 1950, and again in 1951, when I was on the point of burning Humbert Humbert's little black diary. No, I shall never regret *Lolita*. She was like the composition of a beautiful puzzle-- its composition and its solution at the same time, since one is a mirror view of the other, depending on the way you look. Of course she completely eclipsed my other works-- at least those I wrote in English: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Bend Sinister*, my short stories, my book of recollections; but I cannot grudge her this. There is a queer, tender charm about that mythical nymphet.

Though many readers and reviewers would disagree that her charm is tender, few would deny that it is queer-- so much so that when director Stanley Kubrick proposed his plan to make a movie of Lolita, you were quoted as saying, "Of course they'll have to change the plot. Perhaps they will make Lolita a dwarfess. Or they will make her 16 and Humbert 26. " Though you finally wrote the screenplay yourself, several reviewers took the film to task for watering down the central relationship. Were you satisfied with the final product?

I thought the movie was absolutely first-rate. The four main actors deserve the very highest praise. Sue Lyon bringing that breakfast tray or childish pulling on her sweater in the car-- these are moments of unforgettable acting and directing. The killing of Quilty is a masterpiece, and so is the death of Mrs. Haze. I must point out, though, that I had nothing to do with the actual production. If I had, I might have insisted on stressing certain things that were not stressed-- for example, the different motels at which they stayed. All I did was write the screenplay, a preponderating portion of which was used by Kubrick. The "watering down," if any, did not come from my

aspergillum.

Do you feel that Lolita's twofold success has affected your life for the better or for the worse?

I gave up teaching-- that's about all in the way of change. Mind you, I loved teaching, I loved Cornell, I loved composing and delivering my lectures on Russian writers and European great books. But around 60, and especially in winter, one begins to find hard the physical process of teaching, the getting up at a fixed hour every other morning, the struggle with the snow in the driveway, the march through long corridors to the classroom, the effort of drawing on the blackboard a map of James Joyce's Dublin or the arrangement of the semi-sleeping car of the St. Petersburg-Moscow express in the early 1870s-- without an understanding of which neither *Ulysses* nor *Anna Karenin*, respectively, makes sense. For some reason my most vivid memories concern examinations. Big amphitheater in Goldwin Smith. Exam from 8 a.m. to 10:30. About 150 students-- unwashed, unshaven young males and reasonably well-groomed young females. A general sense of tedium and disaster. Half-past eight. Little coughs, the clearing of nervous throats, coming in clusters of sound, rustling of pages. Some of the martyrs plunged in meditation, their arms locked behind their heads. I meet a dull gaze directed at me, seeing in me with hope and hate the source of forbidden knowledge. Girl in glasses comes up to my desk to ask: "Professor Kafka, do you want us to say that . . . ? Or do you want us to answer only the first part of the question?" The great fraternity of C-minus, backbone of the nation, steadily scribbling on. A rustle arising simultaneously, the majority turning a page in their bluebooks, good teamwork. The shaking of a cramped wrist, the falling ink, the deodorant that breaks down. When I catch eyes directed at me, they are forthwith raised to the ceiling in pious meditation. Windowpanes getting misty. Boys peeling off sweaters. Girls chewing gum in rapid cadence. Ten minutes, five, three, time's up.

Citing in Lolita the same kind of acid-etched scene you've just described, many critics have called the book a masterful satiric social commentary on America. Are they right?

Well, I can only repeat that I have neither the intent nor the temperament of a moral or social satirist. Whether or not critics think that in *Lolita* I am ridiculing human folly leaves me supremely indifferent. But I am annoyed when the glad news is spread that I am ridiculing America.

But haven't you written yourself that there is "nothing more exhilarating than American Philistine vulgarity"?

No, I did not say that. That phrase has been lifted out of context, and, like a round, deep-sea fish, has burst in the process. If you look up my little after-piece, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," which I appended to the novel, you will see that what I really said was that in regard to Philistine vulgarity-- which I do feel is most exhilarating-- no difference exists between American and European manners. I go on to say that a proletarian from Chicago can be just as

Philistine as an English duke.

Many readers have concluded that the Philistinism you seem to find the most exhilarating is that of America's sexual mores.

Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude-- all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex.

*Have you ever been psychoanalyzed?
Have I been what?
Subjected to psychoanalytical examination.
Why, good God?*

In order to see how it is done. Some critics have felt that your barbed comments about the fashionability of Freudianism, as practiced by American analysts, suggest a contempt based upon familiarity.

Bookish familiarity only. The ordeal itself is much too silly and disgusting to be contemplated even as a joke. Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appears to me to be one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others. I reject it utterly, along with a few other medieval items still adored by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick.

Speaking of the very sick, you suggested in Lolita that Humbert Humbert's appetite for nymphets is the result of an unrequited childhood love affair; in Invitation to a Beheading you wrote about a 12-year-old girl, Emmie, who is erotically interested in a man twice her age; and in Bend Sinister your protagonist dreams that he is "surreptitiously enjoying Mariette (his maid) while she sat, wincing a little, in his lap during the rehearsal of a play in which she was supposed to be his daughter." Some critics, in poring over your works for clues to your personality, have pointed to this recurrent theme as evidence of an unwholesome preoccupation on your part with the subject of sexual attraction between pubescent girls and middle-aged men. Do you feel that there may be some truth in this charge?

I think it would be more correct to say that had I not written *Lolita*, readers would not have started finding nymphets in my other works and in their own households. I find it very amusing when a friendly, polite person says to me-- probably just in order to be friendly and polite-- "Mr. Naborkov," or "Mr. Nabahkov," or "Mr. Nabkov" or "Mr. Nabohkov," depending on his linguistic abilities, "I have a little daughter who is a regular *Lolita*." People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writings. And then, of course, there is that special type of critic, the ferrety, human-interest fiend, the jolly vulgarian. Someone, for instance, discovered telltale affinities between Humbert's boyhood romance on the Riviera and my own recollections about little Colette, with whom I built damp sand castles in Biarritz when I was ten. Somber Humbert was, of course, thirteen and in

the throes of a pretty extravagant sexual excitement, whereas my own romance with Colette had no trace of erotic desire and indeed was perfectly common-place and normal. And, of course, at nine and ten years of age, in that set, in those times, we knew nothing whatsoever about the false facts of life that are imparted nowadays to infants by progressive parents.

Why false?

Because the imagination of a small child-- especially a town child-- at once distorts, stylizes, or otherwise alters the bizarre things he is told about the busy bee, which neither he nor his parents can distinguish from a bum-blebee, anyway.

What one critic has termed your "almost obsessive attention to the phrasing, rhythm, cadence and connotation of words" is evident even in the selection of names for your own celebrated bee and bumblebee-- Lolita and Humbert Humbert. How did they occur to you?

For my nymphet I needed a diminutive with a lyrical lilt to it. One of the most limpid and luminous letters is "L". The suffix "-ita" has a lot of Latin tenderness, and this I required too. Hence: Lolita. However, it should not be pronounced as you and most Americans pronounce it: Low-lee-ta, with a heavy, clammy "L" and a long "o". No, the first syllable should be as in "lollipop", the "L" liquid and delicate, the "lee" not too sharp. Spaniards and Italians pronounce it, of course, with exactly the necessary note of archness and caress. Another consideration was the welcome murmur of its source name, the fountain name: those roses and tears in "Dolores." My little girl's heartrending fate had to be taken into account together with the cuteness and limpidity. Dolores also provided her with another, plainer, more familiar and infantile diminutive: Dolly, which went nicely with the surname "Haze," where Irish mists blend with a German bunny-- I mean, a small German hare.

You're making a word-playful reference, of course, to the German term for rabbit-- Hase. But what inspired you to dub Lolita's aging inamorato with such engaging redundancy?

That, too, was easy. The double rumble is, I think, very nasty, very suggestive. It is a hateful name for a hateful person. It is also a kingly name, and I did need a royal vibration for Humbert the Fierce and Humbert the Humble. Lends itself also to a number of puns. And the execrable diminutive "Hum" is on a par, socially and emotionally, with "Lo," as her mother calls her.

Another critic has written of you that "the task of sifting and selecting just the right succession of words from that multilingual memory, and of arranging their many-mirrored nuances into the proper juxtapositions, must be psychically exhausting work." Which of all your books, in this sense, would you say was the most difficult to write?

Oh, Lolita, naturally. I lacked the necessary information-- that was the initial difficulty. I did not know

any American 12-year-old girls, and I did not know America; I had to invent America and Lolita. It had taken me some forty years to invent Russia and Western Europe, and now I was faced by a similar task, with a lesser amount of time at my disposal. The obtaining of such local ingredients as would allow me to inject average "reality" into the brew of individual fancy proved, at fifty, a much more difficult process than it had been in the Europe of my youth.

Though born in Russia, you have lived and worked for many years in America as well as in Europe. Do you feel any strong sense of national identity?

I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home. It so happened that I was immediately exposed to the very best in America, to its rich intellectual life and to its easygoing, good-natured atmosphere. I immersed myself in its great libraries and its Grand Canyon. I worked in the laboratories of its zoological museums. I acquired more friends than I ever had in Europe, My books-- old books and new ones-- found some admirable readers. I became as stout as Cortez-- mainly because I quit smoking and started to munch molasses candy instead, with the result that my weight went up from my usual 140 to a monumental and cheerful 200. In consequence, I am one-third American-- good American flesh keeping me warm and safe.

You spent 20 years in America, and yet you never owned a home or had a really settled establishment there. Your friends report that you camped impermanently in motels, cabins, furnished apartments and the rented homes of professors away on leave. Did you feel so restless or so alien that the idea of settling down anywhere disturbed you?

The main reason, the background reason, is, I suppose, that nothing short of a replica of my childhood surroundings would have satisfied me. I would never manage to match my memories correctly-- so why trouble with hopeless approximations? Then there are some special considerations: for instance, the question of impetus, the habit of impetus. I propelled myself out of Russia so vigorously, with such indignant force, that I have been rolling on and on ever since. True, I have rolled and lived to become that appetizing thing, a "full professor," but at heart I have always remained a lean "visiting lecturer." The few times I said to myself anywhere: "Now, that's a nice spot for a permanent home," I would immediately hear in my mind the thunder of an avalanche carrying away the hundreds of far places which I would destroy by the very act of settling in one particular nook of the earth. And finally, I don't much care for furniture, for tables and chairs and lamps and rugs and things-- perhaps because in my opulent childhood I was taught to regard with amused contempt any too-earnest attachment to material wealth, which is why I felt no regret and no bitterness when the Revolution abolished that wealth.

You lived in Russia for twenty years, in West Europe for 20 years, and in America for twenty years. But in 1960,

after the success of Lolita, you moved to France and Switzerland and have not returned to the U. S. since. Does this mean, despite your self-identification as an American writer, that you consider your American period over?

I am living in Switzerland for purely private reasons-- family reasons and certain professional ones too, such as some special research for a special book. I hope to return very soon to America-- back to its library stacks and mountain passes. An ideal arrangement would be an absolutely soundproofed flat in New York, on a top floor-- no feet walking above, no soft music anywhere-- and a bungalow in the Southwest. Sometimes I think it might be fun to adorn a university again, residing and writing there, not teaching, or at least not teaching regularly.

Meanwhile you remain secluded-- and somewhat sedentary, from all reports-- in your hotel suite. How do you spend your time?

I awake around seven in winter: my alarm clock is an Alpine chough-- big, glossy, black thing with big yellow beak-- which visits the balcony and emits a most melodious chuckle. For a while I lie in bed mentally revising and planning things. Around eight: shave, breakfast, enthroned meditation, and bath-- in that order. Then I work till lunch in my study, taking time out for a short stroll with my wife along the lake. Practically all the famous Russian writers of the nineteenth century have rambled here at one time or another. Zhukovski, Gogol, Dostoevski, Tolstoy-- who courted the hotel chambermaids to the detriment of his health-- and many Russian poets. But then, as much could be said of Nice or Rome. We lunch around one p.m., and I am back at my desk by half-past one and work steadily till half-past six. Then a stroll to a newsstand for the English papers, and dinner at seven. No work after dinner. And bed around nine. I read till half-past eleven, and then tussle with insomnia till one a.m. about twice a week I have a good, long nightmare with unpleasant characters imported from earlier dreams, appearing in more or less iterative surroundings-- kaleidoscopic arrangements of broken impressions, fragments of day thoughts, and irresponsible mechanical images, utterly lacking any possible Freudian implication or explication, but singularly akin to the procession of changing figures that one usually sees on the inner palpebral screen when closing one's weary eyes.

Funny that witch doctors and their patients have never hit on that simple and absolutely satisfying explanation of dreaming. Is it true that you write standing up, and that you write in longhand rather than on a typewriter?

Yes. I never learned to type. I generally start the day at a lovely old-fashioned lectern I have in my study. Later on, when I feel gravity nibbling at my calves, I settle down in a comfortable armchair alongside an ordinary writing desk; and finally, when gravity begins climbing up my spine, I lie down on a couch in a corner of my small study. It is a pleasant solar routine. But when I was young, in my twenties and early thirties, I would often stay all day in bed, smoking and writing. Now things have changed. Horizontal prose,

vertical verse, and sedent scholia keep swapping qualifiers and spoiling the alliteration.

Can you tell us something more about the actual creative process involved in the germination of a book--perhaps by reading a few random notes for or excerpts from a work in progress?

Certainly not. No fetus should undergo an exploratory operation. But I can do something else. This box contains index cards with some notes I made at various times more or less recently and discarded when writing *Pale Fire*. It's a little batch of rejects. Help yourself. "Selene, the moon. Selenginsk, an old town in Siberia: moon-rocket town" . . . "Berry: the black knob on the bill of the mute swan" . . . "Dropworm: a small caterpillar hanging on a thread" . . . "In *The New Bon Ton Magazine*, volume five, 1820, page 312, prostitutes are termed 'girls of the town' "... "Youth dreams: forgot pants; old man dreams: forgot dentures" , . . "Student explains that when reading a novel he likes to skip passages 'so as to get his own idea about the book and not be influenced by the author'". . . "Naprapathy: the ugliest word in the language."

"And after rain, on beaded wires, one bird, two birds, three birds, and none. Muddy tires, sun" . . . "Time without consciousness-- lower animal world; time with consciousness-- man; consciousness without time-- some still higher state" . . . "We think not in words but in shadows of words. James Joyce's mistake in those otherwise mar-velous mental soliloquies of his consists in that he gives too much verbal body to thoughts" . . . "Parody of politeness: That inimitable 'Please' -- 'Please send me your beautiful-- ' which firms idiotically address to themselves in printed forms meant for people ordering their product." . . .

"Naive, nonstop, peep-peep twitter of chicks in dismal crates late, late at night, on a desolate frost-bedimmed station platform" . . . "The tabloid headline TORSO KILLER MAY BEAT CHAIR might be translated: 'Celui qui tw an buste peat bien battre une chaise" . . . "Newspaper vendor, handing me a magazine with my story: I see you made the slicks." "Snow falling, young father out with tiny child, nose like a pink cherry. Why does a parent immediately say something to his or her child if a stranger smiles at the latter? 'Sure,' said the father to the infant's interrogatory gurgle, which had been going on for some time, and would have been left to go on in the quiet falling snow, had I not smiled in passing". . . "Inter-columniation: dark-blue sky between two white columns." . . . "Place-name in the Orkneys: Papilio" . . . "Not I, too, lived in Arcadia,' but 'I,' says Death, even am in Arcadia'-- legend on a shepherd's tomb (*Notes and Queries*, June 13, 1868, p. 561)" . . . "Marat collected butterflies" . . . "From the aesthetic point of view, the tapeworm is certainly an undesirable boarder. The gravid segments frequently crawl out of a person's anal canal, sometimes in chains, and have been reported a source of social embarrassment." (*Ann. N. Y. Acad. Sci.* 48:558).

What inspires you to record and collect such

disconnected impressions and quotations?

All I know is that at a very early stage of the novel's development I get this urge to garner bits of straw and fluff, and eat pebbles. Nobody will ever discover how clearly a bird visualizes, or if it visualizes at all, the future nest and the eggs in it. When I remember afterwards the force that made me jot down the correct names of things, or the inches and tints of things, even before I actually needed the information, I am inclined to assume that what I call, for want of a better term, inspiration, had been already at work, mutely pointing at this or that, having me accumulate the known materials for an unknown structure. After the first shock of recognition-- a sudden sense of "this is what I'm going to write"-- the novel starts to breed by itself; the process goes on solely in the mind, not on paper; and to be aware of the stage it has reached at any given moment, I do not have to be conscious of every exact phrase. I feel a kind of gentle development, an uncurling inside, and I know that the details are there already, that in fact I would see them plainly if I looked closer, if I stopped the machine and opened its inner compartment; but I prefer to wait until what is loosely called inspiration has completed the task for me. There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one's mind, can be compared to a painting, and since you do not have to work gradually from left to right for its proper perception, I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing. I do not begin my novel at the beginning. I do not reach chapter three before I reach chapter four, I do not go dutifully from one page to the next, in consecutive order; no, I pick out a bit here and a bit there, till I have filled all the gaps on paper. This is why I like writing my stories and novels on index cards, numbering them later when the whole set is complete. Every card is rewritten many times. About three cards make one typewritten page, and when finally I feel that the conceived picture has been copied by me as faithfully as physically possible-- a few vacant lots always remain, alas-- then I dictate the novel to my wife who types it out in triplicate.

In what sense do you copy "the conceived picture" of a novel?

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should know the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence, and the crank's message in the market place. Art is never simple. To return to my lecturing days: I automatically gave low marks when a student used the dreadful phrase "sincere and simple"-- "Flaubert writes with a style which is always simple and sincere"-- under the impression that this was the greatest compliment payable to prose or poetry. When I struck the phrase out, which I did with such rage in my pencil that it ripped the paper, the student complained that this was what teachers had

always taught him: "Art is simple, art is sincere." Someday I must trace this vulgar absurdity to its source. A schoolmarm in Ohio? A progressive ass in New York? Because, of course, art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex.

In terms of modern art, critical opinion is divided about the sincerity or deceitfulness, simplicity or complexity, of contemporary abstract painting. What is your own opinion?

I do not see any essential difference between abstract and primitive art. Both are simple and sincere. Naturally, we should not generalize in these matters: it is the individual artist that counts. But if we accept for a moment the general notion of "modern art," then we must admit that the trouble with it is that it is so commonplace, imitative, and academic. Blurs and blotches have merely replaced the mass prettiness of a hundred years ago, pictures of Italian girls, handsome beggars, romantic ruins, and so forth. But just as among those corny oils there might occur the work of a true artist with a richer play of light and shade, with some original streak of violence or tenderness, so among the corn of primitive and abstract art one may come across a flash of great talent. Only talent interests me in paintings and books. Not general ideas, but the individual contribution.

A contribution to society?

A work of art has no importance whatever to society. It is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me. I don't give a damn for the group, the community, the masses, and so forth. Although I do not care for the slogan "art for art's sake"-- because unfortunately such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists-- there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art.

What do you want to accomplish or leave behind-- or should this be of no concern to the writer?

Well, in this matter of accomplishment, of course, I don't have a 35-year plan or program, but I have a fair inkling of my literary afterlife. I have sensed certain hints, I have felt the breeze of certain promises. No doubt there will be ups and downs, long periods of slump. With the Devil's connivance, I open a newspaper of 2063 and in some article on the books page I find: "Nobody reads Nabokov or Fulmerford today." Awful question: Who is this unfortunate Fulmerford?

While we're on the subject of self-appraisal, what do you regard as your principal failing as a writer-- apart from forgetability?

Lack of spontaneity; the nuisance of parallel thoughts, second thoughts, third thoughts; inability to express myself properly in any language unless I compose every damned sentence in my bath, in my mind, at my desk.

You're doing rather well at the moment, if we may say so.

It's an illusion.

Your reply might be taken as confirmation of critical comments that you are "an incorrigible leg puller, " "a mystifier, " and "a literary agent provocateur. " How do you view yourself?

I think my favorite fact about myself is that I have never been dismayed by a critic's bilge or bile, and have never once in my life asked or thanked a reviewer for a review. My second favorite fact-- or shall I stop at one?

No, please go on.

The fact that since my youth-- I was 19 when I left Russia-- my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me. My desires are modest. Portraits of the head of the government should not exceed a postage stamp in size. No torture and no executions. No music, except coming through earphones, or played in theaters.

Why no music?

I have no ear for music, a shortcoming I deplore bitterly. When I attend a concert-- which happens about once in five years-- I endeavor gamely to follow the sequence and relationship of sounds but cannot keep it up for more than a few minutes. Visual impressions, reflections of hands in lacquered wood, a diligent bald spot over a fiddle, these take over, and soon I am bored beyond measure by the motions of the musicians. My knowledge of music is very slight; and I have a special reason for finding my ignorance and inability so sad, so unjust: There is a wonderful singer in my family-- my own son. His great gifts, the rare beauty of his bass, and the promise of a splendid career-- all this affects me deeply, and I feel a fool during a technical conversation among musicians. I am perfectly aware of the many parallels between the art forms of music and those of literature, especially in matters of structure, but what can I do if ear and brain refuse to cooperate? I have found a queer substitute for music in chess-- more exactly, in the composing of chess problems.

Another substitute, surely, has been your own euphonious prose and poetry. As one of few authors who have written with eloquence in more than one language, how would you characterize the textural differences between Russian and English, in which you are regarded as equally facile?

In sheer number of words, English is far richer than Russian. This is especially noticeable in nouns and adjectives. A very bothersome feature that Russian presents is the dearth, vagueness, and clumsiness of technical terms.

For example, the simple phrase "to park a car" comes out-- if translated back from the Russian-- as "to leave an automobile standing for a long time." Russian, at least polite Russian, is more formal than polite English. Thus, the Russian word for "sexual"-- *polovoy*-- is slightly indecent and not to be bandied around. The same applies to Russian terms rendering various anatomical and biological notions that are frequently and familiarly expressed in English conversation. On the other hand, there are words rendering certain nuances of motion and gesture and emotion in which Russian excels. Thus by changing the head of a verb, for which one may have a dozen different prefixes to choose from, one is able to make Russian express extremely fine shades of duration and intensity. English is, syntactically, an extremely flexible medium, but Russian can be given even more subtle twists and turns. Translating Russian into English is a little easier than translating English into Russian, and 10 times easier than translating English into French.

You have said you will never write another novel in Russian. Why?

During the great, and still unsung, era of Russian intellectual expatriation-- roughly between 1920 and 1940-- books written in Russian by emigre Russians and published by emigre firms abroad were eagerly bought or borrowed by emigre readers but were absolutely banned in Soviet Russia-- as they still are (except in the case of a few dead authors such as Kuprin and Bunin, whose heavily censored works have been recently reprinted there), no matter the theme of the story or poem. An emigre novel, published, say, in Paris and sold over all free Europe, might have, in those years, a total sale of 1,000 or 2,000 copies-- that would be a best seller-- but every copy would also pass from hand to hand and be read by at least 20 persons, and at least 50 annually if stocked by Russian lending libraries, of which there were hundreds in West Europe alone. The era of expatriation can be said to have ended during World War II. Old writers died, Russian publishers also vanished, and worst of all, the general atmosphere of exile culture, with its splendor, and vigor, and purity, and reverberative force, dwindled to a sprinkle of Russian-language periodicals, anemic in talent and provincial in tone. Now to take my own case: It was not the financial side that really mattered; I don't think my Russian writings ever brought me more than a few hundred dollars per year, and I am all for the ivory tower, and for writing to please one reader alone-- one's own self. But one also needs some reverberation, if not response, and a moderate multiplication of one's self throughout a country or countries; and if there be nothing but a void around one's desk, one would expect it to be at least a sonorous void, and not circumscribed by the walls of a padded cell. With the passing of years I grew less and less interested in Russia and more and more indifferent to the once-harrowing thought that my books would remain banned there as long as my contempt for the police state and political oppression prevented me from entertaining the vaguest thought of return. No, I will not write another novel in Russian, though I do allow myself a very few short poems now and then. I wrote my last Russian novel a quarter of a century ago. But today, in compensation, in a spirit of justice to my little American

muse, I am doing something else. But perhaps I should not talk about it at this early stage.

Please do.

Well, it occurred to me one day-- while I was glancing at the varicolored spines of *Lolita* translations into languages I do not read, such as Japanese, Finnish or Arabic-- that the list of unavoidable blunders in these fifteen or twenty versions would probably make, if collected, a fatter volume than any of them. I had checked the French translation, which was basically very good yet would have bristled with unavoidable errors had I not corrected them. But what could I do with Portuguese or Hebrew or Danish? Then I imagined something else. I imagined that in some distant future somebody might produce a Russian version of *Lolita*. I trained my inner telescope upon that particular point in the distant future and I saw that every paragraph, pock-marked as it is with pitfalls, could lend itself to hideous mistranslation. In the hands of a harmful drudge, the Russian version of *Lolita* would be entirely degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases or blunders. So I decided to translate it myself. Up to now I have about sixty pages ready.

Are you presently at work on any new project?

Good question, as they say on the lesser screen. I have just finished correcting the last proofs of my work on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*-- four fat little volumes which are to appear this year in the Bollingen Series; the actual translation of the poem occupies a small section of volume one. The rest of the volume and volumes two, three and four contain copious notes on the subject. This opus owes its birth to a casual remark my wife made in 1950-- in response to my disgust with rhymed paraphrases of *Eugene Onegin*, every line of which I had to revise for my students-- "Why don't you translate it yourself?" This is the result. It has taken some ten years of labor. The index alone runs to 5,000 cards in three long shoe boxes; you see them over there on that shelf. My translation is, of course, a literal one, a crib, a pony. And to the fidelity of transposal I have sacrificed everything: elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar.

In view of these admitted flaws, are you looking forward to reading the reviews of the book?

I really don't read reviews about myself with any special eagerness or attention unless they are masterpieces of wit and acumen-- which does happen now and then. And I never reread them, though my wife collects the stuff, and though maybe I shall use a spatter of the more hilarious *Lolita* items to write someday a brief history of the nymphet's tribulations. I remember, however, quite vividly, certain attacks by Russian emigre critics who wrote about my first novels 30 years ago; not that I was more vulnerable then, but my memory was certainly more retentive and enterprising, and I was a reviewer myself. In the nineteen-twenties I was clawed at by a certain Mochulski who could never stomach my utter indifference to organized mysticism, to religion, to the church-- any church.

There were other critics who could not forgive me for keeping aloof from literary "movements," for not airing the "angoisse" that they wanted poets to feel, and for not belonging to any of those groups of poets that held sessions of common inspiration in the back rooms of Parisian cafes. There was also the amusing case of Georgiy Ivanov, a good poet but a scurrilous critic. I never met him or his literary wife Irina Odoevtsev; but one day in the late nineteen-twenties or early nineteen-thirties, at a time when I regularly reviewed books for an emigre newspaper in Berlin, she sent me from Paris a copy of a novel of hers with the wily inscription "Spasibo za Korolya, damn, valeta" (thanks for King, Queen, Knave)-- which I was free to understand as "Thanks for writing that book," but which might also provide her with the alibi: "Thanks for sending me your book," though I never sent her anything. Her book proved to be pitifully trite, and I said so in a brief and nasty review, Ivanov retaliated with a grossly personal article about me and my stuff. The possibility of venting or distilling friendly or unfriendly feelings through the medium of literary criticism is what makes that art such a skewy one.

You have been quoted as saying: My pleasures are the most intense known to man: butterfly hunting and writing. Are they in any way comparable?

No, they belong essentially to quite different types of enjoyment. Neither is easy to describe to a person who has not experienced it, and each is so obvious to the one who has that a description would sound crude and redundant. In the case of butterfly hunting I think I can distinguish four main elements. First, the hope of capturing-- or the actual capturing-- of the first specimen of a species unknown to science: this is the dream at the back of every lepidopterist's mind, whether he be climbing a mountain in New Guinea or crossing a bog in Maine. Secondly, there is the capture of a very rare or very local butterfly-- things you have gloated over in books, in obscure scientific reviews, on the splendid plates of famous works, and that you now see on the wing, in their natural surroundings, among plants and minerals that acquire a mysterious magic through the intimate association with the rarities they produce and support, so that a given landscape lives twice: as a delightful wilderness in its own right and as the haunt of a certain butterfly or moth. Thirdly, there is the naturalist's interest in disentangling the life histories of little-known insects, in learning about their habits and structure, and in determining their position in the scheme of classification-- a scheme which can be sometimes pleasurably exploded in a dazzling display of polemical fireworks when a new discovery upsets the old scheme and confounds its obtuse champions. And fourthly, one should not ignore the element of sport, of luck, of brisk motion and robust achievement, of an ardent and arduous quest ending in the silky triangle of a folded butterfly lying on the palm of one's hand.

What about the pleasures of writing?

They correspond exactly to the pleasures of reading, the bliss, the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader: by the satisfied writer and the grateful reader, or-- which is

the same thing-- by the artist grateful to the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images and by the artistic reader whom this combination satisfies.

Every good reader has enjoyed a few good books in his life so why analyze delights that both sides know? I write mainly for artists, fellow-artists and follow-artists. However, I could never explain adequately to certain students in my literature classes, the aspects of good reading-- the fact that you read an artist's book not with your heart (the heart is a remarkably stupid reader), and not with your brain alone, but with your brain and spine. "Ladies and gentlemen, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel." I wonder if I shall ever measure again with happy hands the breadth of a lectern and plunge into my notes before the sympathetic abyss of a college audience.

What is your reaction to the mixed feelings vented by one critic in a review which characterized you as having a fine and original mind, but "not much trace of a generalizing intellect, "and as "the typical artist who distrusts ideas"?

In much the same solemn spirit, certain crusty lepidopterists have criticized my works on the classification of butterflies, accusing me of being more interested in the subspecies and the subgenus than in the genus and the family. This kind of attitude is a matter of mental temperament, I suppose. The middlebrow or the upper Philistine cannot get rid of the furtive feeling that a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas. Oh, I know the type, the dreary type! He likes a good yarn spiced with social comment; he likes to recognize his own thoughts and throes in those of the author; he wants at least one of the characters to be the author's stooge. If American, he has a dash of Marxist blood, and if British, he is acutely and ridiculously class-conscious; he finds it so much easier to write about ideas than about words; he does not realize that perhaps the reason he does not find general ideas in a particular writer is that the particular ideas of that writer have not yet become general.

Dostoevski, who dealt with themes accepted by most readers as universal in both scope and significance, is considered one of the world's great authors. Yet you have described him as "a cheap sensationalist, clumsy and vulgar. " Why?

Non-Russian readers do not realize two things: that not all Russians love Dostoevski as much as Americans do, and that most of those Russians who do, venerate him as a mystic and not as an artist. He was a prophet, a claptrap journalist and a slapdash comedian. I admit that some of his scenes, some of his tremendous, farcical rows are extraordinarily amusing. But his sensitive murderers and soulful prostitutes are not to be endured for one moment-- by this reader anyway.

Is it true that you have called Hemingway and Conrad "writers of books for boys"?

That's exactly what they are. Hemingway is certainly the

better of the two; he has at least a voice of his own and is responsible for that delightful, highly artistic short story, "The Killers." And the description of the iridescent fish and rhythmic urination in his famous fish story is superb. But I cannot abide Conrad's souvenir-shop style, bottled ships and shell necklaces of romanticist cliches. In neither of those two writers can I find anything that I would care to have written myself. In mentality and emotion, they are hopelessly juvenile, and the same can be said of some other beloved authors, the pets of the common room, the consolation and support of graduate students, such as-- but some are still alive, and I hate to hurt living old boys while the dead ones are not yet buried.

What did you read when you were a boy?

Between the ages of ten and fifteen in St. Petersburg, I must have read more fiction and poetry-- English, Russian and French-- than in any other five-year period of my life. I relished especially the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Alexander Blok. On another level, my heroes were the Scarlet Pimpernel, Phileas Fogg, and Sherlock Holmes. In other words, I was a perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library. At a later period, in Western Europe, between the ages of 20 and 40, my favorites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson, Joyce, Proust, and Pushkin. Of these top favorites, several-- Poe, Jules Verne, Emmuska Orezy, Conan Doyle, and Rupert Brooke-- have lost the glamour and thrill they held for me. The others remain intact and by now are probably beyond change as far as I am concerned. I was never exposed in the twenties and thirties, as so many of my coevals have been, to the poetry of the not quite first-rate Eliot and of definitely second-rate Pound. I read them late in the season, around 1945, in the guest room of an American friend's house, and not only remained completely indifferent to them, but could not understand why anybody should bother about them. But I suppose that they preserve some sentimental value for such readers as discovered them at an earlier age than I did.

What are your reading habits today?

Usually I read several books at a time-- old books, new books, fiction, nonfiction, verse, anything-- and when the bedside heap of a dozen volumes or so has dwindled to two or three, which generally happens by the end of one week, I accumulate another pile. There are some varieties of fiction that I never touch-- mystery stories, for instance, which I abhor, and historical novels. I also detest the so-called "powerful" novel-- full of commonplace obscenities and torrents of dialogue-- in fact, when I receive a new novel from a hopeful publisher-- "hoping that I like the hook as much as he does"-- I check first of all how much dialogue there is, and if it looks too abundant or too sustained, I shut the book with a bang and ban it from my bed.

Are there any contemporary authors you do enjoy reading?

I do have a few favorites-- for example, Robbe-Grillet and

Borges. How freely and gratefully one breathes in their marvelous labyrinths! I love their lucidity of thought, the purity and poetry, the mirage in the mirror.

Many critics feel that this description applies no less aptly to your own prose. To what extent do you feel that prose and poetry intermingle as art forms?

Except that I started earlier-- that's the answer to the first part of your question. As to the second: Well, poetry, of course, includes all creative writing; I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. The magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation. As in today's scientific classifications, there is a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor.

You have also written that poetry represents "the mysteries of the irrational perceived through rational words." But many feel that the "irrational" has little place in an age when the exact knowledge of science has begun to plumb the most profound mysteries of existence. Do you agree?

This appearance is very deceptive. It is a journalistic illusion. In point of fact, the greater one's science, the deeper the sense of mystery. Moreover, I don't believe that any science today has pierced any mystery. We, as newspaper readers, are inclined to call "science" the cleverness of an electrician or a psychiatrist's mumbo jumbo. This, at best, is applied science, and one of the characteristics of applied science is that yesterday's neutron or today's truth dies tomorrow. But even in a better sense of "science"-- as the study of visible and palpable nature, or the poetry of pure mathematics and pure philosophy-- the situation remains as hopeless as ever. We shall never know the origin of life, or the meaning of life, or the nature of space and time, or the nature of nature, or the nature of thought.

Man's understanding of these mysteries is embodied in his concept of a Divine Being. As a final question, do you believe in God?

To be quite candid-- and what I am going to say now is something I never said before, and I hope it provokes a salutary little chill-- I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed, had I not known more.

Last-modified: Fri, 26 Jul 2002 06:11:39 GMT

Оцените этот текст: