

From: Ed <[REDACTED]>

To: "Epstein, Jeff" <jeevacation@gmail.com>

Subject: My Encounter With Nabokov (New York Review of Books-- Advance copy, please do not circulate or post)

Date: Mon, 11 Mar 2013 16:08:55 +0000

Attachments: Nabokov.pdf

I wandered into Lit 311 at the beginning of my sophomore year at Cornell in September 1954. It was not that I had any interest in European literature, or any literature. I was just shopping for a class that met on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings so that I wouldn't have any Saturday classes, and "literature" also filled one of the requirements for graduation. It was officially called "European Literature of the Nineteenth Century," but unofficially called "Dirty Lit" by the Cornell Daily Sun, since it dealt with adultery in Anna Karenina and Madame Bovary.

The professor was Vladimir Nabokov, an émigré from tsarist Russia. About six feet tall and balding, he stood, with what I took to be an aristocratic bearing, on the stage of the two-hundred-fifty-seat lecture hall in Goldwin Smith. Facing him on the stage was his white-haired wife Vera, whom he identified only as "my course assistant." He made it clear from the first lecture that he had little interest in fraternizing with students, who would be known not by their name but by their seat number. Mine was 121. He said his only rule was that we could not leave his lecture, even to use the bathroom, without a doctor's note.

He then described his requisites for reading the assigned books. He said we did not need to know anything about their historical context, and that we should under no circumstance identify with any of the characters in them, since novels are works of pure invention. The authors, he continued, had one and only one purpose: to enchant the reader. So all we needed to appreciate them, aside from a pocket dictionary and a good memory, was our own spines. He assured us that the authors he had selected—Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Gogol, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Jane Austen, Franz Kafka, Gustave Flaubert, and Robert Louis Stevenson—would produce tingling we could detect in our spines.

So began the course. Unfortunately, distracted by the gorges, lakes, movie houses, corridor dates, and other more local enchantments of Ithaca, I did not get around to reading any of Anna Karenina before Nabokov sprang a pop quiz. It consisted of an essay question: "Describe the train station in which Anna first met Vronsky."

Initially, I was stymied by this question because, having not yet read the book, I did not know how Tolstoy had portrayed the station. But I did recall the station shown in the 1948 movie starring Vivien Leigh. Having something of an eidetic memory, I was able to visualize a vulnerable-looking Leigh in her black dress wandering through the station, and, to fill the exam book, I described in great detail everything shown in the movie, from a bearded vendor hawking tea in a potbellied copper samovar to two white doves practically nesting overhead.

Only after the exam did I learn that many of the details I described from the movie were not in the book.

Evidently, the director Julien Duvivier had had ideas of his own. Consequently, when Nabokov asked "seat 121" to report to his office after class, I fully expected to be failed, or even thrown out of Dirty Lit.

What I had not taken into account was Nabokov's theory that great novelists create pictures in the minds of their readers that go far beyond what they describe in the words in their books. In any case, since I was presumably the only one taking the exam to confirm his theory by describing what was not in the book, and since he apparently had no idea of Duvivier's film, he not only gave me the numerical equivalent of an A, but offered me a one-day-a-week job as an "auxiliary course assistant." I was to be paid \$10 a week. Oddly enough, it also involved movies. Every Wednesday, the movies changed at the four theaters in downtown Ithaca, called by Nabokov "the near near," "the near far," "the far near," and "the far far." My task, which used up most of my weekly payment, was to see all four new movies on Wednesday and Thursday, and then brief him on them on Friday morning. He said that since he had time to see only one movie, this briefing would help him decide which one of them, if any, to see. It was a perfect job for me: I got paid for seeing movies.

All went well for the next couple of months. I had caught up with the reading, and greatly enjoyed my Friday morning chats with Nabokov in his office on the second floor of Goldwin Smith. Even though they rarely lasted more than five minutes, it made me the envy of other students in Dirty Lit. Vera was usually sitting across the

desk from him, making me feel as though I had interrupted their extended study date. My undoing came just after he had lectured on Gogol' s Dead Souls.

The day before I had seen The Queen of Spades, a 1949 British film based on Alexander Pushkin' s 1833 short story. It concerned a Russian officer who, in his desperation to win at cards, murdered an elderly Russian countess while trying to learn her secret method of picking cards in the game of faro. He seemed uninterested in having me recount the plot, which he must have known well, but his head shot up when I said in conclusion that it reminded me of Dead Souls. Vera also turned around and stared directly at me. Peering intently at me, he asked, "Why do you think that?"

I instantly realized I had made a remark that apparently connected with a view he had, or was developing, concerning these two Russian writers. At that point, I should have left the office, making some excuse about needing to give the question more thought. Instead, I said pathetically, "They are both Russian."

His face dropped, and Vera turned back to face him. While my gig continued for several more weeks, it was never the same.

Best regards

Ed Epstein

www.edwardjayepstein.com